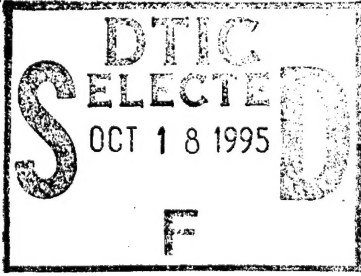


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Eric Knapp

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Major: History

Under the Supervision of Professor Peter Maslowski

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August, 1995

“WAR WITHOUT PITY”

GUERRILLA CONFLICT IN THE MEXICAN WAR

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Although not a formula for unconventional warfare, this work provides insight into one of America's most successful counter-guerrilla campaigns. A close examination of irregular warfare in Mexico reveals the importance of an innovative officer corps during an unconventional struggle. Officer effectiveness and outstanding leadership allowed the American Army to prevail against a strong and determined guerrilla adversary.

The United States Army limited the effectiveness of guerrilla forces during the Mexican War through a procedure of punitive expeditions against Mexican irregulars and a policy of conciliation toward civilians. The American officer corps foresaw the potential problem of unconventional warfare, developed innovative means to counter it, and enforced discipline in their troops to carry out the policy. An important component of American success was the willingness and ability to alter procedures as circumstances dictated. Officers maintained flexibility by combining aggressive expeditions designed to seize the initiative in the unconventional struggle, and a policy of conciliation toward Mexican civilians, which deprived guerrillas of popular support. Flexibility also played an important part in tactical execution, as commanders tailored the composition of their units to their immediate objectives.

The procedure of conciliation and aggressive counter-guerrilla operations gave American units the general parameters for the unconventional war. How the two areas balanced in any given area seemed best left to the local commander's discretion. The officer corps led the procedure's development, and implemented the plan, which ultimately limited the unconventional threat to a level of nuisance and ineffectiveness.

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Introduction

During the Mexican War, the United States Army limited the effectiveness of Mexican guerrilla forces due to the strong leadership of its officer corps, which developed an informal operational procedure consisting of punitive expeditions against Mexican irregulars and a policy of conciliation toward civilians. Officers foresaw the potential problem of guerrillas, developed means to counter them, and enforced discipline in their troops in order to carry out the policy. An important component of American success was the willingness and ability to alter procedures flexibly as circumstances dictated. A close examination of these successful anti-guerrilla operations reveals the importance of an innovative officer corps during an unconventional campaign.

Overshadowed by the Civil War, the conflict between Mexico and the United States in 1846-48 remains one of America's least studied wars. Territorial gains increased the size of the United States by a third and gave birth to an American empire. The conflict stands as a testament to the powerful national urge of Manifest Destiny, and granted America control of two ocean coasts. Reading traditional texts of American history, one gets the impression that victory over the unorganized and ill-led Mexican army was nearly a foregone conclusion. General Winfield Scott and his invading army seemed to march from victory to victory with nearly impudent ease as a weak Mexican military and even more tumultuous government crumbled before the American juggernaut. Actually, success was far from preordained. The dangers of invading and

occupying a foreign country were legion, and the difficulty of pacifying a hostile population concerned and frightened many commanders.

Traditional histories of the Mexican War consider the guerrilla struggle a sideshow in the conflict's overall context. Unconventional warfare did not decide the war's outcome; therefore it received little attention. General histories concentrate on the set-piece battles and General Winfield Scott's extraordinary march to Mexico City. The war's historiography relegates the role of guerrillas to one of unimportance without considering why their impact was marginal. Contributing to this lack of historical attention is the relatively few references to irregular warfare in source material. Even during and immediately after the war, the sometimes ugly and always brutal guerrilla struggle received little attention in American newspapers and in letters written from soldiers in the field to families and friends in the States.¹

Acting not as a criticism but as an addition, this study portrays the guerrilla war as an integral component of a primarily conventional conflict. In hindsight, the ineffectiveness of Mexican guerrilla forces in changing the war's outcome is readily apparent. However, the possibility existed for them to devastate the American invader's lines of supply and communication. The magnitude and difficulty of invading and occupying a hostile country can not be stressed enough. In his definitive two volume work on the Mexican War, Justin Smith stated, "The guerillas [sic] failed completely to

¹ Samuel R. Curtis, Mexico Under Fire: Being the Diary of Samuel Ryan Curtis, 3rd Ohio Volunteer Regiment, During the American Military Occupation of Northern Mexico, 1846-1847, ed. Joseph E. Chance (Forth Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1994), p. xvii.

affect the general course of the war, as they were expected to do, but even as late as March, 1848, the road from Vera Cruz to Jalapa was safe for large parties only.”² A successful guerrilla campaign could have cut lines of supply and inflicted tremendous casualties on the American force.³

The study of unconventional conflict accelerated with the beginning of the Cold War in the mid-twentieth century, but from the beginning of organized warfare, guerrilla tactics traditionally have been the forte of weaker combatants. The Mexican War was no exception. As American armies under Generals Scott and Zachary Taylor defeated conventional Mexican resistance, the importance of the guerrilla campaign began to take shape. Commanders during the Mexican War tended to see the unconventional struggle as part of the whole rather than a separate entity, thus independent study of guerrilla operations must have seemed impractical and unnecessary. Methods for dealing with the guerrillas sprang from an ability to adapt in different situations. Brian Linn’s excellent study, The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902, argues a similar point. Linn contends that success against guerrillas in the Philippines depended on a local commander’s flexibility and imagination rather than a specific strategy that

² Justin H Smith, The War with Mexico (Gloucester, Mass.: The Macmillan Company, 1919), p. 423.

³ For differing interpretations of the Mexican guerrilla conflict’s importance in the war see: Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America, Revised and Expanded (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Jack K. Bauer, The Mexican War 1846-1848 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1947); and John M. Gates, “Indians and Insurrectos: The U.S. Army’s Experience with Insurgency” In Defense of the Republic, ed. David Skaggs and Robert Browning III. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1991.

applies in all situations. Linn understands, as did many American commanders during the Mexican War, that each conflict and even different areas in a given conflict, are unique. The United States officer corps in Mexico developed an informal operating procedure that retained the importance of conciliating civilians and actively persecuting guerrilla forces, while remaining flexible enough to adapt to changing conditions. The example of a successful anti-guerrilla campaign during the Mexican War is by no means a prescription for unconventional warfare or a formula meant to be followed by today's military. It stands as an interpretation of events and as an example from which ideas about the nature of guerrilla warfare can be gleaned.

Mexico and the United States went to war in 1846 because each side's political objectives left no room for compromise.⁴ The United States sought the surrender of New Mexico, California, and the Rio Grande River as the southern border of Texas, while Mexico completely rejected the loss of such extensive tracts of land. On January 13, 1846, President James K. Polk ordered Brigadier General Taylor to cross the Nueces River, which Mexico considered the southern border of Texas, and to march toward the Rio Grande.⁵ Beginning in late April, American troops won a series of battles in the North, but Mexico would not accede to demands for surrender. By refusing to come to terms, Mexico forced the United States to choose between giving up its war aims or further escalating the conflict. President Polk decided to change the Army's strategic objective and ordered a deeper penetration into Mexico. In March 1847, General Scott

⁴ Bauer, The Mexican War, p. xix.

⁵ Millett and Maslowski, For the Common Defense, p. 145.

landed at the Mexican port city of Veracruz with approximately 10,000 troops. He then marched over three hundred miles and fought four major engagements to capture Mexico City by September. American forces remained in the heart of enemy territory until the ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in May 1848.⁶ During the invasion and subsequent eight months of occupation, Scott's small force and tenuous line of communication from Veracruz to Mexico City stood vulnerable to guerrilla assault, but unconventional Mexican forces were ineffectual in their attempts to influence the course of the conflict. Why was this the case?

Distinct parameters, both chronological and physical, are necessary in a work dealing with a conflict as complex as the Mexican War. Although it considers the period beginning with the outbreak of hostilities and ending with the withdrawal of American troops from Mexico, this essay focuses on Scott's expedition. Guerrilla assaults in this area held the greatest threat to American forces, but the Army's officers successfully limited their impact. General Taylor's area of operation in the north is also considered, primarily as a counter-point to the southern campaign. Guerrillas constituted less of a threat to Taylor's shorter supply lines, but he had more difficulty in dealing with these unconventional attacks. Making distinctions between the terms guerrilla, irregular, and partisan is impossible, due to Mexico's lack of standardization in its effort at unconventional warfare. Former bandits made-up some groups, while prior regular army troops led by ex-officers manned other bands. The Mexican government gave official

⁶ Ibid., p. 155.

recognition to some guerrilla units, while others acted of their own accord.⁷ American commanders made little distinction between groups and used the same procedure of aggressive operations and conciliation against different guerrilla threats. Another possible problem of definition arises regarding the term 'limited effectiveness.' Limited is not a precise word, but the situation does not lend itself to concrete definition. This does not imply that guerrillas were of no concern to American commanders, or that they scored no successes. On the contrary, officers and men were very aware of the potential hazards of partisan warfare. By taking the irregular conflict seriously, and by implementing aggressive counter-measures, the United States Army relegated it to a nuisance rather than a major threat.

The procedure the American Army developed to counter the guerrilla threat was two-fold. The first and most visible aspect was active counter-guerrilla operations, in the form of patrols and punitive expeditions conducted by highly mobile and aggressive strike forces. Another type of active counter-guerrilla operation was the use of indigenous inhabitants as irregular auxiliaries. An important aspect of both practices was the degree of flexibility commanders maintained in their response to the unconventional threat. In some situations, no more than a handful of men pursued guerrillas, while in other cases whole companies and brigades took part, complete with artillery and infantry. Although guerrilla hunting was the most visible means the Army used to limit partisan effectiveness, it was only one aspect of the procedure the American military developed.

⁷ John R. Kenly, Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer: War With Mexico, in the Years 1846-7-8 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1873), p. 309.

The second, and perhaps the most effective, means the United States Army used in the unconventional struggle was treating Mexican civilians with fairness and justice to deprive guerrillas of support in the countryside. Generals Scott and Taylor actively courted the goodwill of the Mexican people in order to undermine that support. They paid for requisitioned supplies, enforced discipline among American troops, prosecuted offending individuals, acted as a police force providing civilians with security from hostile Indians and bandits, and courted the favor of the Catholic Church. Taylor's troubles with guerrillas stemmed from not implementing this aspect of the procedure as fully as Scott. The northern commander's inability to control his primarily volunteer force caused his anti-guerrilla campaign to be less successful. United States officers realized their task would be infinitely more difficult if it included extensive civilian pacification, so they worked hard not to give the Mexican people any more reason to resist.

Before discussing America's successful counter-guerrilla campaign, a closer look at the nature of the threat is needed. If guerrillas posed no threat to the American war effort, a study of counter-guerrilla operations would simply be a conjectural exercise. The historical relevance of this work rests on the fact that the Mexican unconventional threat was significant. It occupied the thoughts and fears of American commanders throughout the conflict, and on several occasions caused serious harm to the American advance.

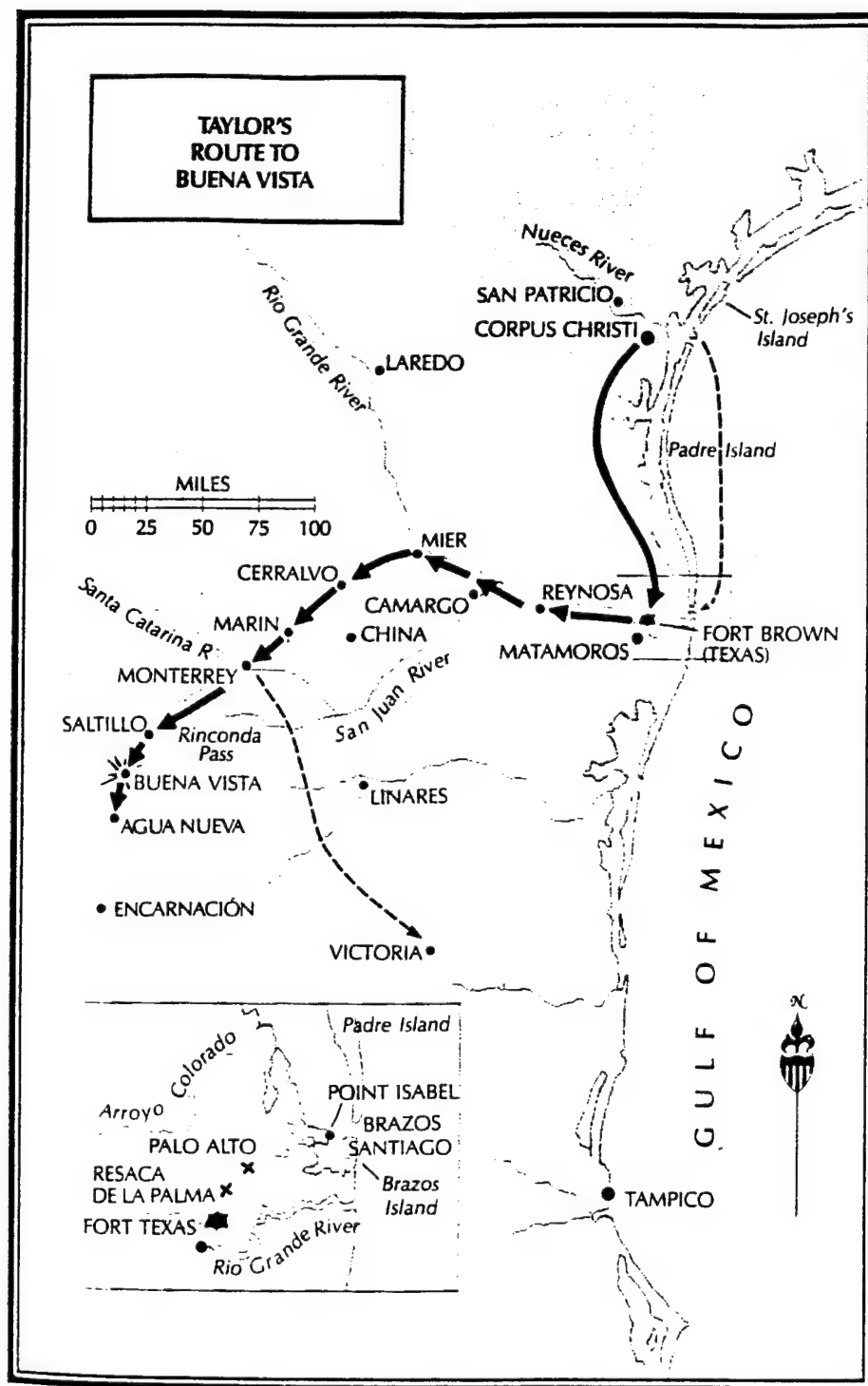
Chapter One: Nature of the Threat

I had left the Rinconda [Pass]¹ some five miles behind when a cloud of dust rising on the road, about a half mile ahead, attracted my notice. I withdrew some fifty yards from the road and concealed myself and horse behind a clump of yuccas. A party of wild-looking horsemen soon made their appearance on the road and halted not two hundred yards from my place of concealment. They seemed to be looking for the cause of the dust that I had raised. I spotted one, who from his air of superiority and distinguished appearance I judged to be the leader,...when a ferocious yell from the guerilars [sic] told me that I was seen....I struck off in the chapperal [sic] to my right, receiving a volley of escopette balls without damage. The chapperal [sic] grew in clumps, which at the speed I was going I found impossible to avoid. Lucifer [my horse] cleared some at a flying leap, but most of them he dashed through. The sharp thorns tore my flesh and drove my steed wild with their cruel thrusts....Lucifer now labored hard. The halt had stiffened his joints, and the guerillars [sic] gained on me and came so close that some of them were swinging their lazos for a throw. Was I to go up after all? In pure desperation, I pulled out a small dirk, and gave my suffering steed a cut in the neck, drew my pistol for my last shot as the blood spurted out. My gallant darling increased his speed, his limbs regained their vigor, and as we dashed through San Catarina [River], I was a good four hundred yards ahead. They a short distance beyond, and finding it in vain, gave me a parting salute of Escopette balls, and shaking their lances in impotent rage and baffled hate, they went back and I was SAFE!²

Private Samuel Chamberlain, of the U.S. Army 1st Dragoons, endured the above adventure while acting as a messenger between Brigadier General John E. Wool's camp

¹ "Rinconda Pass was one of the only routes through the Sierra Madre Oriental large enough to accommodate wagons. At this 'corner,' the intersection of two mountain ranges, is the infamous "Paso de la Muerto" where highwaymen laid in wait for merchants and travelers. At the time of the Mexican War travelers reported that the pass was lined with crosses commemorating the many murdered pilgrims." Quoted from Curtis, Mexico Under Fire, p. 264.

² Samuel E. Chamberlain, My Confession: The Recollections of a Rogue (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1956), pp. 160-165.



Map reproduced from: John S. D. Eisenhower, So Far From God: The U.S. War With Mexico, 1846-1848 (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 31.

near Saltillo and General Taylor's headquarters at Monterey. Although he escaped to eloquently relate his harrowing escapade, many other messengers during the Mexican War, known in the Army as express riders, were not as well mounted or as lucky.

Before analyzing American counter-guerrilla operations, it is imperative to understand the nature and seriousness of the guerrilla threat. From the first shots fired along the Rio Grande in 1846 to the end of American occupation in the summer of 1848, the guerrilla conflict played an important role in the Mexican War. Looking at who the guerrillas were, how they fought, and the seriousness of their threat offers a glimpse at the struggle's nature and why its study is important. Guerrillas primarily threatened American supply routes and lines of communication. By attacking wagon trains, the Mexican irregulars severed Generals Scott and Taylor's lines of supply during each of their advances. An urgency and trepidation can be discerned from the tenor in both generals' writing, which shows that while preying on supply shipments, the guerrillas also preyed on the minds of both men. Historians devote little attention to the irregular aspect of this primarily conventional struggle, but the participants, from politicians on both sides to privates like Chamberlain, placed great emphasis on the guerrilla struggle's possible dangers and potential outcomes.

Mexican Attitudes

Even before hostilities commenced, debate raged in the Mexican camp over the level of importance that should be given to guerrilla resistance. As war with the United States loomed on the horizon, a common topic of conversation on Mexico City streets and in the halls of government was the mode of conflict most likely to produce victory. Some advocated the fortification of passes in the Sierra Mountains so the invaders would be trapped in the northern deserts. Influenced by warfare's romantic image during this time, many argued for meeting the Yankee on the open plains where, it was assumed, the superior Mexican cavalry would operate to best effect. A minority advocated that pitched battles should only be fought after guerrillas harassed the enemy on the march and destroyed their means of supply.³ For the most part, Mexicans firmly believed they could match the American invader in the open field.⁴ Only after several defeats at the hands of Scott and Taylor did the Mexican government embrace guerrilla warfare as a means of repelling the American advance.

When the fortunes of war turned against Mexico, its military and political leaders eagerly listened to those who advocated a mass partisan effort. Even after the crushing

³ [Alcarez, Ramón, et al.], The Other Side or Notes for the History of the War Between Mexico and the United States, trans. and ed. Albert C. Ramsey. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1850), p. 439. This interesting work, first published in the United States in 1850, is a compilation of essays written by fifteen Mexican intellectuals in 1848. Seeking to give the Mexican perspective of the war, the authors rationalize Mexico's defeat by heaping blame on the shoulders of Santa Anna. Although ripe with mistakes and inconsistencies, it offers a glimpse into the Mexican viewpoint before and after the conflict.

⁴ Millet and Maslowski, For the Common Defense, p. 146.

American victory at Cerro Gordo, one such patriot declared that the guerrillas could still save Mexico and announced to his countrymen, "You will soon behold the banner of the haughty invader trailing in the dust."⁵ Although the United States military eventually disappointed this bellicose individual, at the time he spoke, America's ability to counter guerrilla assaults was anything but certain.

As Scott marched ever closer to Mexico City, the Mexican Minister for Foreign Affairs, José Fernando Ramirez, reported that the government "put all its hopes" in a guerrilla program to save the country, and that this plan "has become the central idea of its political maneuvers."⁶ The recollections of Spanish guerrillas devastating Napoleon's army of occupation and the success of these same tactics in the Mexican War for Independence played a large part in the discussions. Cabinet members argued that guerrilla warfare culturally suited the Mexican people, and that the government simply needed the courage to initiate such activities. An early version of the government's proposal called for "the arming of 50,000 men with lances, daggers, and machetes in order to carry on the guerrilla warfare."⁷ After several modifications and two weeks of debate, Congress, hoping to establish a semblance of structure, issued a plan providing guidelines and a veneer of organization to the guerrilla effort.

⁵ An unidentified individual, quoted in Smith, War with Mexico, p. 168.

⁶ Ramirez, José Fernando, Mexico During the War with the United States, ed. Walter V. Scholes and trans. Elliott B. Scherr. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1950), p. 125.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

With rumors of further American incursion, the Mexican government issued the proclamation on April 8, 1847. The plan allowed any citizen to apply for a permit from state or local governments to raise a body of volunteers of no less than fifty. He could then give the group his name, and assume an officer's rank from lieutenant to colonel, depending on the number of recruits. The government would provide material support, but more importantly, the bands could keep any goods taken from the enemy, and after dividing it amongst themselves, sell the merchandise tax free.⁸ One such call for volunteers appeared in the *Monitor*, a Mexico City newspaper:

PROCLAMATION

"The citizen Mariana Salas, General of Brigade and Colonel of the Regiment Hidalgo, to my fellow-citizens."

My friends: The present movement is the most proper to excite the public spirit, and form a nation of men truly free. When an enemy triumphs by his union to rob us of our dearest interests, there is nothing more sure and more certain than to vanquish him by valor and constancy. For this end I have obtained permission to raise a guerilla [sic] corps, with which to attack and destroy the invaders in every manner imaginable. The conduct of the enemy, contrary both to humanity and natural rights, authorizes us to pursue him without pity. *War without pity* [italics mine] unto death! will be the motto of the guerilla [sic] warfare of vengeance. Therefore I invite all my fellow-citizens, especially my brave subordinates, to unite at general headquarters to enroll themselves, from nine until three in the afternoon, so that it may be organized in the present week.

José Mariana Salas

Mexico, April 21, 1847.⁹

Many individuals followed the prescribed method, but some enterprising or patriotic Mexicans simply started attacking Americans when the opportunity permitted.

⁸ Smith, *War with Mexico*, vol. II., p. 421.

⁹ From the *Monitor* newspaper, quoted in Kenly, *Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer*, p. 309.

The government threw the system wide open as Scott's army penetrated deeper into Mexican territory. As a sign of their desperation, and indirectly acknowledging their lack of control over the situation, the government ordered on August 16, 1847, that all people within eighty miles of any point occupied by the enemy were to attack them with "the arms each may have, fire-arms or cold steel, great or small, long or short - in a word, if there is nothing else with sticks and stones."¹⁰ Panicked declarations such as these offered little solace for the people as Scott's army descended into the Valley of Mexico.

Newspapers in Mexico City tried to impart more concrete knowledge about the best ways guerrillas could be employed. Arguing that the dagger should be the people's favorite weapon, they pointed out that lightly armed men, and even women and children, could burn wagons and intercept communications. Taking advantage of their knowledge of the country-side, guerrillas could travel quickly day or night, concentrate when the moment was right, and strike vulnerable points along the American line of advance. A popular uprising would cancel "superior strength by avoiding it, and nullifying discipline by fighting in a style that had no need of discipline." Santa Anna endorsed the government's plan and advocated Salas's 'war without pity.'¹¹ Although the press and the politicians began to accept guerrilla warfare as the best means of repelling the American advance, others maintained serious reservations.

¹⁰ Relacion Historia que hace la Exma. Asamblea Deptl. De Quertaro. Queret: 1847. Quoted in Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 421.

¹¹ Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 169.

Not everyone in Mexico readily adopted the rationale behind guerrilla warfare. Despite the excitement caused by the government's proclamation, people in the streets of Mexico City did not flock to the banners of would-be guerrilla leaders. In a letter to a friend Ramirez related that the guerrilla bands "about which you have probably seen proclamations are not getting many recruits."¹² He went on to say that arming thousands of common people and telling them to fight when and where the opportunity presented itself, would mean ultimate devastation in the countryside. Rather than solve the problem of American invasion, rampaging guerrillas were sure to attack civilians and increase the level of destruction. The minister perceived a crucial detail that even some of today's intellectuals tend to ignore in the study of history.

Ramirez understood that all conflicts exist within their own unique parameters. Guerrillas successfully harassed Napoleon's army, but Mexico was not Spain. He identified three areas of difference that would hamper Mexico's irregular effort. The first major difference was the type of struggle both countries faced. France conducted a war of conquest and occupation, while long before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended formal hostilities in Mexico, it was clear that the Americans fought a war, not of domination, but of dismemberment. Once the United States acquired New Mexico and California, the invading armies were sure to leave, thus the people felt less inclined to risk their lives opposing a temporary occupation.¹³ The second major limiting factor

¹² Ramirez, Mexico During, p. 125.

¹³ A considerable number of Democrats in the United States hoped to annex all of Mexico, but to Ramirez this never seemed to be a consideration. For more information on the "All Mexico" movement, see Bauer, The Mexican War, pp. 367-370.

identified by Ramirez was that while Spain was densely populated by North American standards, large areas of Mexico remained wilderness. Guerrilla advocates argued that the advantage of surprise and ease of escape made Mexico an ideal place to conduct unconventional operations, but they missed one of the key factors in any successful guerrilla campaign -- popular support. Ramirez pointed out that aid and comfort for guerrillas would not be found in the wild areas where they hoped to operate because few civilians lived in those places. The third major difference between Spain and Mexico's guerrilla operations also dealt with the problem of gaining the people's support. A common perception among Mexican civilians was that their government was hopelessly disorganized and could not protect them.¹⁴ Why would they support a government that did not seem to hold their best interests in mind? Matching Ramirez's trepidation, if not his conclusion, over the use of guerrillas, Americans felt the advent of an unconventional war would be one of the most serious threats they would face.

American Fears

As early as March 30, 1846, two days after Taylor occupied Matamoros, some American officers believed a major guerrilla war would prove devastating. In a letter to his wife, Major Philip Barbour of the 3rd Regiment, United States Infantry, stated that it was "but reasonable to expect that their people will rush in to defend their own firesides, and they might raise an army of 10,000 men in a short time, while we are cut off, not

¹⁴ Ramirez, Mexico During, p. 125.

only from retreat, but from all succor.”¹⁵ Sharing this sentiment, Captain Robert Anderson of the 3rd Regiment, United States Artillery, declared that if the common people decided to rise against the Americans it “would render the country unconquerable.”¹⁶ Upon hearing of General Salas’s proclamation, Anderson could scarcely imagine the destruction that would result. He understood not only the danger this type of warfare would mean for the American Army, but also that the situation would surely spin out of control. Mexican civilians would be “the heaviest of losers” in such a chaotic confrontation.¹⁷ As the war progressed and guerrilla efforts began to take an increasingly large toll on American forces, other officers began to realize the seriousness of the unconventional threat.

Lieutenant Colonel Henry S. Lane of the Indiana Volunteer’s 1st Regiment wrote on May 9, 1847, about his fears of a major partisan effort. “They [the Mexicans] cannot for some time get up another force large enough to meet either Scott or Taylor, but if they chose they may make gurilla [sic] war upon us & protract this war for long years to come.”¹⁸ Scott readily grasped the problems involved with invading Mexico. On May 6, 1847, he wrote Secretary of War William Marcy that the main difficulty of his advance

¹⁵ Philip Norbourn Barbour and Martha Isabella Hopkins Barbour, Journals of the Late Brevet Major Philip Norbourn Barbour and his wife Martha Isabella Hopkins Barbour: Written During the War with Mexico - 1846, ed. Rhoda van Biber Tanner Doubleday. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1936), p. 23.

¹⁶ Robert Anderson, An Artillery Officer in The Mexican War, 1846-7 (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1911), p. 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁸ Henry S. Lane, “The Mexican War Journal of Henry S. Lane.” Indiana Magazine of History, ed. Graham A. Barringer. LIII (December 1957), p. 432.

occurred in gathering subsistence “from a country covered with exasperated guerrillas and banditti, and maintaining with inadequate garrisons and escorts communications with the rear.”¹⁹ He also understood that precautions would be necessary if he hoped to spare the Army from potentially disastrous guerrilla attacks. In another letter to the War Secretary on July 19, 1847, Scott informed Marcy that Mexican generals were preparing “for a guerrilla war upon our detachments, trains and stragglers, and they may, without great precautions on our part, do much harm in the aggregate.”²⁰ Before taking a closer look at the ‘aggregate’, it is important to explore who these guerrillas were, and to discover why their methods so worried America’s commanding general.

The Men

The greatest difficulty in analyzing Mexican guerrillas is their lack of standardization. Making distinctions among the terms guerrilla, ranchero, irregular, partisan, and unconventional combatants is difficult, since Mexico’s guerrilla organization was extremely disjointed. Simple bandits comprised the majority of some groups, while others formed around ex-officers and their regular troops. As an example of this diversity, one of Central Mexico’s most feared and effective partisan chiefs was Padre Caledonio Domeco Jarauta -- a Catholic priest. The Mexican government gave official recognition to some guerrilla units while others acted completely on their own. In execution the variance is also astonishing. The guerrilla leader Antonio Canales

¹⁹ Kenly, Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer, p. 308.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 310.

operated in close conjunction with regular army generals José de Urrea and Mariano Arista in their fight to halt Taylor's northern army. Other groups worked independently, and sometimes even against the regular Army in serving their own interests.

Generalizations emerge from this seeming chaos, but because of the many variations in the guerrilla war they remain broad in scope.

Appearing in personal recollections and official reports, the term "ranchero" became synonymous with lightly armed irregular cavalry operating in northern Mexico from 1846 to 1848. "Ranchero" originally applied to ranch hands and cattle workers populating this area, but as the war progressed it became associated as a general word for mounted guerrillas. Carrying a wide range of armaments, the one weapon in common for these groups was a rawhide or braided horsehair lariat, called the *lazo*. Used to deadly effect, a favorite tactic for the rancheros was to throw a loop over an unwary or distracted adversary and dispose of their helpless victim with a knife or saber. The Americans, most of whom had never seen a rope used in this manner, marveled at the skill of these superb horseman.²¹

Another general group of guerrillas became known as "lancers." Usually comprised of former regular Army cavalry, these units displayed uncommon discipline and were some of the American's most feared opponents in the guerrilla struggle. Their principle weapon was a lance, approximately nine feet in length and tipped with a metal point, that could be used in an over-hand thrust or crouched under the arm while

²¹ Curtis, Mexico Under Fire, p. 227.

charging. As light cavalry they presented little danger to concentrated groups of infantry, but disorganized or raw soldiers greatly feared these troops. Private J. Jacob Oswandel described them by saying, "These guerillas [sic] are composed of men, mounted on spirited mustangs, well-equipped with rifles, pistols, carbines, daggers, lances and lassoes. They generally have good and brave officers.... Their motto is, 'No quarter to the Yankees,' and we would sooner face ten of the regular Mexican Army than one of these outlawed guerillas [sic]." ²² Among the Americans in the north, a common rumor circulated that the lance points were coated with a deadly poison. Although no proof of this claim can be found, it served to enhance the terror these riders inspired. ²³

"Skulkers or banditti" referred to small groups of guerrillas, usually working in parties of two or three, that would lie in wait for soldiers straggling behind the main body of moving troops. Operating on foot, they harassed supply trains and worried commanders, but in and of themselves offered little direct threat to American units. Speaking about the lack of security that existed along his supply route, General Scott wrote the Secretary of War, on June 4, 1847, saying, "It is ascertained that any sick or wounded men left in the road, or in small villages, would be certainly murdered by guerilla [sic] parties, rancheros or banditti." ²⁴ Brigadier General George Cadwalader described some of the problems he encountered with these types of irregulars. At disturbingly frequent intervals guerrillas would "discharge escopets [guns] at small

²² J. Jacob Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War 1846-47-49 (Philadelphia: n.p., 1885), p. 215.

²³ Ibid., p. 265.

²⁴ Scott, quoted in Kenly, Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer, p. 309.

portions of our troops and train. The discharge usually proceeded from behind dense thickets almost impracticable for our flankers to penetrate, and not infrequently resulted in the loss of men, horses, and mules."²⁵ Although never offering a direct challenge to major units, these harassing tactics increased the difficulty of transportation and supply.

The Guerrilla Captains

Just as diverse as the groups themselves, their leaders came from all backgrounds and social stations. Antonio Canales and José de Urrea plagued Taylor's troops in the north, while Padre Caledonio Domeco Jarauta, Juan Clímaco Rebolledo, and Brigadier General Joaquin Rea worked against Scott in Central Mexico. These five individuals were the most powerful guerrilla leaders. Although numerous other important captains appear in the historical records, discussing each of these men in a work of this size is impossible.²⁶

By the time of the Mexican War, Antonio Canales, a lawyer from Monterrey, was an experienced unconventional military commander. In 1839 he and others sought to create the Republic of the Rio Grande. Canales led his recruits to defeat against

²⁵ General Cadwalader's report. U.S. Congress. 30th Congress, 1st Session. Senate Executive Document 1. Message from the President . . . at the Commencement of the First Session of the Thirtieth Congress. Appendix, p. 18.

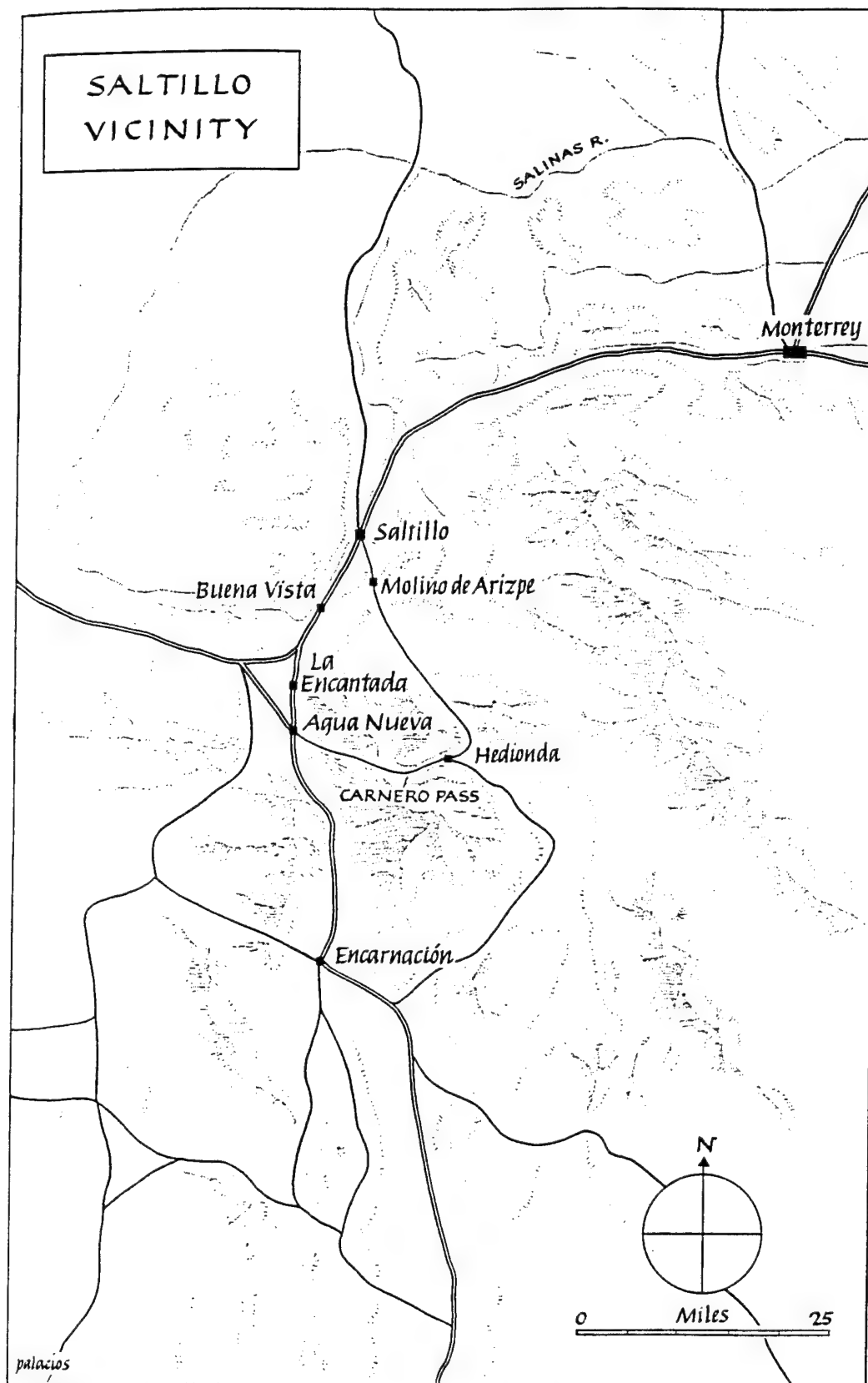
²⁶ Alcarez, *The Other Side*, pp. 441-442; Smith, *War with Mexico*, vol. II., p. 421. Active in Central Mexico were: Juan Aburto, Manuel García, José María García, the Spanish priest J. A. Martínez, T. Marin in control near Córdoba, Francisco Mendoza, Vincente Salcedo, M. Senobio near the coast, and J. M. Vázquez. Operating in the north were: Pantaleon Gutierrez, Augustin Iturbide, Emilio Lambert, Jesus Romero, and Augustin Ricoy.

government troops near Saltillo in 1839. Many Texans had joined him in the struggle to break from Mexico, and later blamed him for the failure. During the Mexican War, Canales sided with the government and led a large force of rancheros against Taylor's army in the north. His skill and cunning earned him the name "Chapperal [sic] Fox." Displaying that ability, his troops worked in conjunction with General José de Urrea's men to sever Taylor's supply and communication lines around Saltillo for over one month in the spring of 1847.²⁷

Canales's associate in the north was José de Urrea. Another experienced leader, his first major command came during the Mexican invasion of Texas in 1836 where he served as a general in the regular Army. After the war with Texas, Urrea remained in the North fighting raiding Indian parties. He aligned himself with Santa Anna during the political struggles between 1838 and 1848, and during the war led a division of Mexican cavalry into northern Mexico through Tula Pass to attack Taylor's supply lines. He attracted large numbers of irregular recruits and worked closely with Canales to isolate Taylor in 1847.²⁸

²⁷ Curtis, Mexico Under Fire, p. 284.

²⁸ Ibid.



Map reproduced from: Bauer, *The Mexican War*, p. 203.

The guerrilla effort in Central Mexico also benefited from skilled leadership. Brigadier General Joaquin Rea commanded the guerrillas around Puebla, and successfully besieged that town from September 13 until October 10, 1847. Rea's forte was combining individuals and small groups into larger more effective units and giving them a certain amount of organization and direction.²⁹ Juan Clímaco Rebolledo commanded a force of some eight hundred irregulars in the Veracruz area. Having a reputation as one of the more humane guerrilla leaders, he conducted an astute unconventional campaign near the coast until his capture in November 1847.³⁰ Padre Caledonio Domeco Jarauta was perhaps the most colorful leader among a cast of audacious characters. This Catholic priest wore a gold-laced sombrero into battle and seemed to be motivated by a romantic taste for adventure. Jarauta excelled because of "his keen mind, his energy and his extreme courage."³¹ Escaping American pursuit time after time, the Padre built up a reputation for being one of the war's most elusive guerrillas. Despite repeated efforts the Americans never captured Jarauta, but his own country arrested and shot him for undisclosed "revolutionary activity" only one month after the last enemy troops departed.³²

²⁹ Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 173.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 423.

³¹ Alcaez, The Other Side, p. 441.

³² Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 423.

How They Operated

Stories of guerrilla atrocities increased the level of viciousness that characterized the unconventional struggle in Mexico's 'war without pity.' Usually killing those unfortunate enough to fall into their hands, guerrillas commonly did not take prisoners.³³

Private Chamberlain certainly had reason to fear for his life during his flight through Rinconda Pass. In grizzly detail he related what he could expect if captured:

Woe to the unfortunate soldier who straggled behind. He was lassoed, stripped naked, and dragged through clumps of cactus until his body was full of needle-like thorns; then, his privates cut off and crammed into his mouth, he was left to die in the solitude of the chapperal [sic] or to be eaten alive by vultures and coyotes.³⁴

One observer at Monterrey reported that the lancers "murdered indiscriminately all the wounded Americans in that part of the field. The surgeons and their assistants, flying from the fate of their patients, were hotly pursued by the enemy."³⁵ J. Jacob Oswandel said guerrillas "generally put themselves on or by the road-side to attack provision and specie trains and murder the soldiers who may, from fatigue, lag behind our army; and sometimes they even cut our men's throat, heart and tongue out, hanging them on a limb of a tree right over their bodies; they also stop and murder our scouts, messengers, etc."³⁶ Although some men became prisoners and stayed alive to be exchanged for captured Mexicans, this practice diminished as the war progressed because of the conflict's

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Chamberlain, My Confession, p. 69.

³⁵ Joseph E. Chance, Jefferson Davis's Mexican War Regiment (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), p. 49.

³⁶ Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War, p. 216.

increasingly brutal nature. Americans also refused to deal with most irregular bands in prisoner exchanges because they felt the guerrilla struggle went beyond the rules and conventions of 'civilized' warfare.

Supply and communications were favorite targets for Mexican guerrillas. Here they found the greatest chance of success and the most profit. Large wagon trains commonly stretched over two miles along Mexico's narrow roads. The largest number of guards stationed themselves at both ends, thus leaving the center thinly defended and the most vulnerable to attack. One historian outlined the common method for attacking these trains in pointing out that the guerrillas "trained to charge at full speed through an ordinary thicket, could readily attack them [the wagons] from ambush at about the middle point, create a stampede and do a great deal of mischief." Adding to the trains' vulnerability was their lack of cavalry escort. Most major guerrilla bands could outdistance infantry pursuit "for every Mexican ranchero had at least one smart pony."³⁷ American commanders eventually found they needed to take extraordinary measures, such as increasing the number of escorts and including cavalry and artillery, to insure the safety of their supply routes.

Proving American fears to be well founded, the guerrillas scored several major successes during the war. Although none of these victories altered the war's outcome, they indicate the seriousness of the unconventional threat. Both Generals Scott and Taylor endured a period of time in which partisan units totally severed their lines of

³⁷ Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 170.

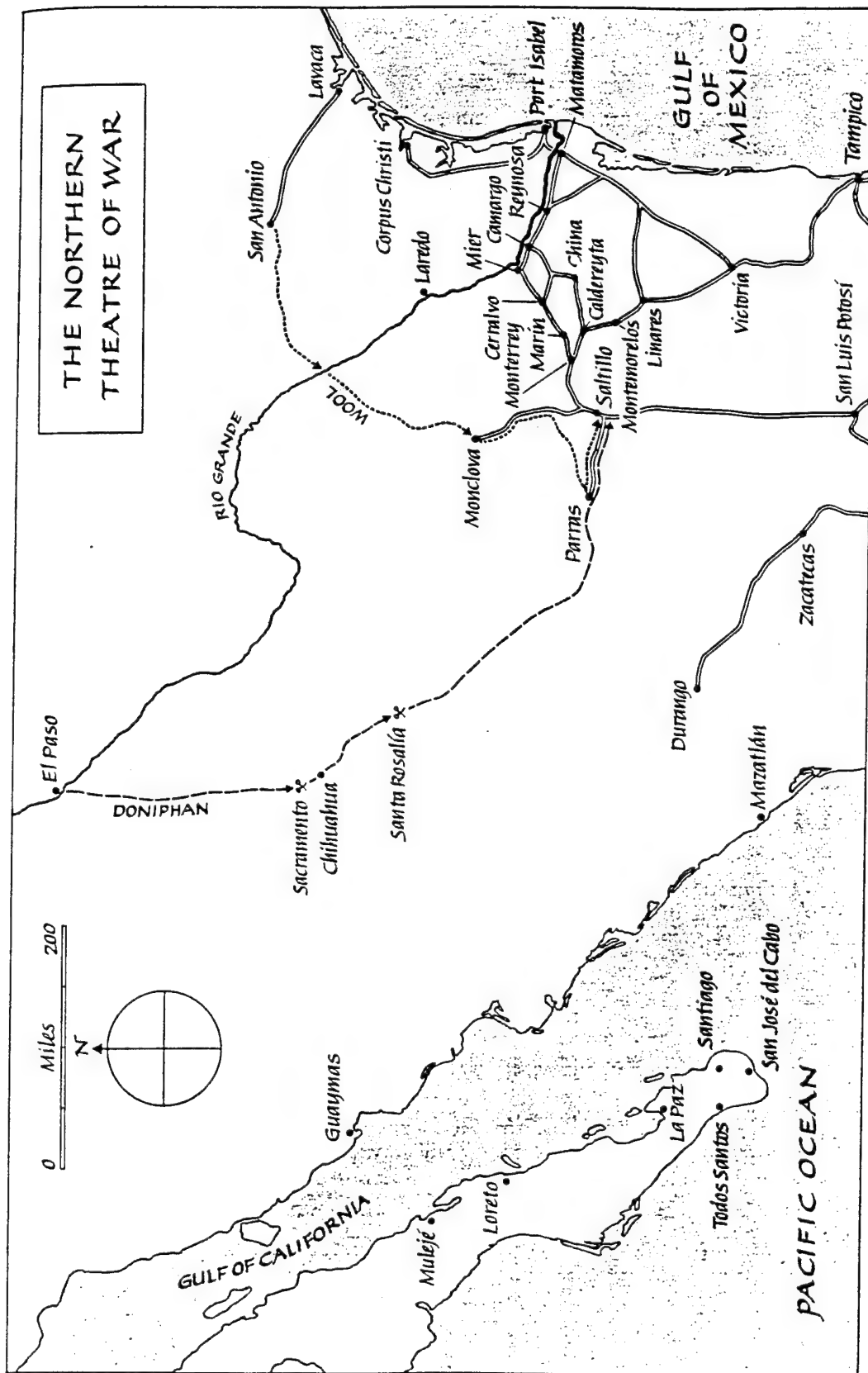
supply and communication. Recounting every incident of guerrilla attack would make this work prohibitively large, so a detailed look at how they compromised American logistics and the difficulty in restoring supply will show the importance of the counter-guerrilla effort.

Taylor's Troubles

Taylor's guerrilla troubles started early and continued until the final days of the war. Still on the Rio Grande's northern side on April 9, 1846, Taylor's army buzzed with the disappearance of quartermaster Colonel Truman Cross when he did not return from a routine horseback ride. Fears rose when the Army learned that "Antonio Canales with his hated rancheros had been detected in the vicinity."³⁸ On April 15, Lieutenant David Porter conducted a patrol of ten troopers to scout the area of Cross's disappearance. Guerrillas attacked the group, and Porter, along with three of his men, died in the ensuing fire-fight. With the American Army's appearance on the Rio Grande, the inhabitants of the neighboring ranches "armed themselves, and laid in ambush for those who straggled off." Mexican and American officials assumed it was these groups that had attacked the Americans.³⁹

³⁸ Eisenhower, So Far From God, p. 63.

³⁹ Alcaez, The Other Side, p. 42.



Map reproduced from: Bauer, *The Mexican War*, p. 91.

The original party did not find Cross, but subsequent patrols discovered his mutilated body near the vicinity of Porter's ambush, and nobody in the American camp doubted that "he was foully assassinated by a party from the other side who were hovering around the camp."⁴⁰

Over the next year, guerrilla activity continued to be a recurrent problem for the troops in Taylor's army. While commanding the occupation forces at Matamoros, Colonel Samuel R. Curtis, of the 3d Ohio Volunteer Regiment, related several instances of dangerous guerrilla operations. On September 13, 1846, a party of fifteen Texas Rangers came under fire while traveling some twenty miles from the city. The Texans escaped with two casualties, but had to leave one of their wounded comrades on the field. After securing reinforcements from Curtis, they returned to the area the next day to conduct a search, only to be attacked again by a band of Canales's men. Faring better than the previous day, the Rangers killed three Mexicans and returned without serious injury to themselves. One lucky rider barely escaped death when a ranchero lassoed him. The Ranger fired two rounds from his Colt revolver, both striking the guerrilla in the chest, as the rope dragged him from the saddle.⁴¹ On a more personal level, Curtis began to fear for his life after a guerrilla rode into Matamoros on September 21, shot a Mexican working as a guide for the Rangers, and then made good his escape in a mad dash through the streets. Curtis assumed that if guerrillas "dare come to the center of the city in broad day light and kill a man, I take it they may in the night find it an easy matter to

⁴⁰ George G. Meade, quoted in Eisenhower, So Far From God, p. 65.

⁴¹ Curtis, Mexico Under Fire, p. 35.

kill any of us. I shall examine the caps on my pistols very carefully tonight."⁴² Although bothersome and dangerous to those involved, guerrilla actions affected relatively few troops in 1846. The situation drastically changed with the coming of spring in 1847.

Guerrillas completely severed Taylor's lines of communication and supply from late February to the end of March. The Mexican Buena Vista offensive in the early part of 1847 caused Taylor to shift units south before the battle, thus weakening garrisons along the American supply route. Late in 1846, Santa Anna gathered some 25,000 troops at San Luis Potosi and pushed north. He intended to strike Taylor's army, which had recently been weakened by the transfer of troops to Scott's pending Veracruz invasion. Unbeknownst to the Americans, a division of light cavalry under General José Urrea slipped through Tula Pass and linked up with Canales. Santa Anna's advance caused enormous alarm and confusion in northern Mexico, and just as fewer American troops were guarding supply trains, fresh Mexican recruits flocked to the guerrilla bands.⁴³ In early February, 1847, Colonel George Morgan led an expedition from Camargo against Canales's irregulars who had attacked a supply train near the village of China. Staying well clear of Morgan's large force, the 'Fox' evaded his pursuers. During Morgan's futile march, an ominous silence greeted the Americans in the villages along the way.

⁴² Ibid., p. 37.

⁴³ Smith, War with Mexico, vol. I., p. 399.

No men were present, presumably because they had joined Canales.⁴⁴ The guerrillas boasted of killing 161 Americans during February alone.⁴⁵

The cooperation between Canales and Urrea's mixed command of regulars and rancheros stands as one of the few examples of guerrilla forces working closely with the Mexican Army as part of an overall plan, and illustrates the effectiveness of such a strategy. Taylor's first sign of serious trouble came on February 24, the day after his victory at Buena Vista, when Urrea's lancers with men from Canales's band descended on a large wagon train running along the Monterrey - Camargo road. Containing one hundred ten wagons, three hundred mules and escorted by thirty-four men, the lucrative target stood no chance against Urrea's well executed attack. Isolating both ends of the train, the Mexican cavalry engaged the escort and closed off all means of escape. Facing overwhelming odds and a hopeless position, the guards under Lieutenant William T. Barbour of the 1st Kentucky Regiment, surrendered, and watched the teamsters slaughtered and the wagons looted and burned. Barbour and his command spent the remainder of the war in captivity. All told, American losses stood at 110 wagons destroyed, 100 teamsters killed, and nearly \$100,000 in supplies lost.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Franklin Smith, The Mexican War Journal of Captain Franklin Smith, ed. Joseph E. Chance. (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), pp. 208-209.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁴⁶ Chamberlain, My Confession, pp. 175-177; Curtis, Mexico Under Fire, p. 266; Luther Giddings, Sketches of the Campaign in Northern Mexico by an Officer of the First Regiment of Ohio Volunteers (New York: George P. Putnam & Co., 1853), pp. 291, 303 and 320; S. Compton Smith, Chile Con Carne, or the Camp and the Field (New York: Miller & Curtis, 1857), pp. 359-361. Chamberlain reported numerous wanton acts of cruelty such as teamsters being "lassoed, stripped naked, and then dragged through

By March 1, Urrea and Canales's men succeeded in driving off the small American garrisons at Marín, Cerralvo, and Puntiaaguda, thus placing them in firm control of the main wagon route between Monterrey and Camargo. On March 2, Colonel Curtis, now commanding at Camargo, had become so concerned with his break in communications he requested Texas Governor J. Pinckney Henderson to send 2,000 mounted volunteers to secure his supply line. He then sent a letter to President Polk claiming that 50,000 new troops would be necessary to avert disaster in the North. Although Polk felt this to be an outrageous number, the danger seemed real enough, and the Secretary of War informed Scott that troops earmarked for the coming Veracruz invasion might be needed for further operations along the Rio Grande.⁴⁷

Reacting quickly to the potentially devastating guerrilla threat, Taylor ordered the first of several missions to clear his lines of supply and communication to the Rio Grande. Major Luther Giddings, with 260 men and 160 wagons, set out from Monterrey on March 5 with orders to get supplies from Camargo.⁴⁸ The trail between Pappagallos and Cerralvo narrowed to allow only a single wagon, and the thick chaparral surrounding the road offered an excellent area for ambush. On March 7, about one mile from

clumps of cactus, and horribly mutilated," and a boy of sixteen tied to a forge "and a fire hole blown into him until he expired in the most fearful agony." Another had "an incision made in his abdomen, cartridges inserted and the victim blown up!" After guerrillas killed her father, attackers captured a young girl and forced her to sit naked on top of Canales's dinner table. This last is almost surely an exaggeration, yet all of these stories circulated widely among American troops and served to increase the level of brutality in the northern guerrilla struggle.

⁴⁷ Bauer, *The Mexican War*, p. 210.

⁴⁸ Giddings, *Sketches*, pp. 289-327. The force comprised of three companies from the 1st Ohio and two from the 1st Kentucky along with two pieces of artillery.

Cerralvo, out-riders warned Giddings of an approaching Mexican force. No sooner had Giddings ordered the wagons parked and the men into defensive positions, than Mexican riders struck the column's lead elements. The lancers shot past the American positions near the train's front and rampaged down the trail, setting wagons on fire and blowing up the ammunition cart as they went. They only dispersed after the field artillery unlimbered and "opened a shower of grape and canister."⁴⁹ Although the cannon did more damage to the wagons than the attackers, the guerrillas withdrew. Giddings lost sixteen men and fifty-two wagons. He remained in defensive positions throughout the night due to the danger of another attack, and limped into Cerralvo the next day. Deciding any further advance might meet with another assault, and fearing he would not again be warned in time to prepare, Giddings dispatched riders to Curtis asking for rations, ammunition and two companies of infantry. Curtis led the reinforcements and arrived without difficulty, much to Gidding's relief, in Cerralvo on March 12. The strengthened train then returned to Camargo the following day.⁵⁰ Although Giddings completed his mission, the losses he suffered and the still present danger dictated further expeditions to open the American supply line.

Fresh from the fight at Buena Vista, Colonel Humphrey Marshall and three companies of Kentucky cavalry received Taylor's order on March 14 to destroy the noose around Camargo. Soon after they departed Monterrey, Taylor's scouts learned that

⁴⁹ Curtis, Mexico Under Fire, p. 153.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 153; Giddings, Sketches, pp. 289-327; Bauer, The Mexican War, p. 218.

Urrea's main force was near Marín. Setting out to reinforce the cavalry with a mixed force of dragoons, Colonel Jefferson Davis's Regiment, and Lieutenant Braxton Bragg's field battery, Taylor linked up with Marshall early on the morning of March 16. The cavalry reported that Urrea was nearby, probably waiting to ambush a train preparing to leave Camargo. After rushing reinforcements to the endangered wagons, Taylor advanced toward the Mexicans' reported location. Perceiving his light cavalry to be overmatched, Urrea fled to Montemorelos. The new influx of American troops to guard trains and patrol the area forced Urrea to conclude that further attacks would be too dangerous, so later in the month he returned south.

Taylor's troubles did not end with the departure of Urrea. Canales continued to plague the area until the war's end. In the autumn of 1847 guerrillas still gained recruits from nearly every ranch and village. Wagon trains were "liable at any moment, while in transit, to be attacked by them. They had adopted a system of annoyances, that required the utmost vigilance of our troops, escorting them, to guard against attack."⁵¹ Only in the last few months of the war, when Taylor allowed Brigadier General John E. Wool to adopt some of Scott's countermeasures, would the situation along the Rio Grande settle into an uneasy peace.

⁵¹ S. Compton Smith, Chile Con Carne, p. 358.

Scott's Troubles

The guerrilla threat in Central Mexico posed serious problems for Scott's advance, and further illustrated the tremendous difficulties in American supply and communications when faced with a strong irregular presence. For over three months, Scott found himself cut off from his supply base on the coast. Facing similar attacks as those on Taylor in the north, and from just as skilled guerrilla leaders, America's commanding general struggled with the problems of supply and the evacuation of wounded suffered during his several pitched battles. Puebla, Scott's major interior supply point, lay besieged for nearly a month, even the most heavily guarded wagon trains came under attack, and 'skulkers' murdered sick and wounded soldiers along the roadside. Throughout Scott's advance from the sea and during the subsequent occupation, the 'war without pity' was of vital importance to the American effort in Central Mexico.

Scott began his invasion on March 9, 1847, when he landed at Veracruz with some 10,000 men. By March 29 the port city surrendered, and the American advance began the next week. Using roughly the same route as Cortez three hundred years before, Scott marched toward Mexico City along the National Highway. Unlike today's streets, this 'Highway' was little more than a well-used dirt road that became nearly impassable for large wagons at its worst points.⁵² After fighting a battle at Cerro Gordo, Scott occupied Jalapa on April 18. While there he sent home 3,700 twelve-month volunteers

⁵² Smith, War with Mexico, vol. I., p. 16.

whose enlistments were about to expire. Left with only 7,100 men, including the sick and wounded who numbered 2,000, Scott pushed on to Puebla in order to remove the bulk of his force from the disease prone lowlands.⁵³ The army's vanguard, under Brigadier General Joseph Worth, moved forward and occupied Puebla on May 15. Faced with crushing supply problems and a serious manpower shortage, here the American advance ground to a halt.

The loss of nearly thirty-five percent of his available troops forced Scott to make a difficult decision. He felt the position at Puebla was insecure, and he could no longer spare troops to guard the road to Veracruz from incessant guerrilla attacks. He ordered the garrisons at Jalapa and Perote to abandon their positions and join the main force at Puebla.⁵⁴ This risky move effectively cut his ties with the coast and made his army totally dependent upon local supply sources. Scott said that at this point in his advance "the whole route to Vera Cruz and all communications with home, being, for the time, abandoned. We had to throw away the scabbard and to advance with the naked blade in hand."⁵⁵ While at Jalapa in April, Scott issued General Order No. 128, commanding that "supplies from Vera Cruz may not be forthcoming," and stressed the importance of treating civilians well so they would not hide or destroy goods. He went on to emphasize that all officers and men needed to buy any goods they requisitioned, and that this order

⁵³ Winfield Scott, Memoirs of Lieut.-General Scott, LL.D. (New York: Sheldon & Company Publishers, 1864), p. 453.

⁵⁴ Scott to Childs, June 3, 1847, U.S. Congress, 30th Congress, 1st Session, House Executive Document 60. Mexican War Correspondence, pp. 1002-1003.

⁵⁵ Scott, Memoirs, p. 460.

would remain in effect indefinitely because supply problems would only become more urgent further in the interior. He reemphasized the seriousness of the problem by saying that if the "line of supply falls, it is a long way to the coast."⁵⁶ The Duke of Wellington, following Scott's progress from England, declared, "Scott is lost. He has been carried away by successes. He can't take the city, and he can't fall back upon his base."⁵⁷

President Polk joined in the criticism of Scott when he said the general "has undoubtedly committed a great military error by breaking up the post at Jalapa and leaving his whole rear exposed to the enemy. The guerrillas were undoubtedly encouraged to make attacks by the fact, which was known to them, that General Scott had left his rear unprotected."⁵⁸ Not strong enough to continue the advance, or to defend his supply lines from guerrillas, Scott now depended on the arrival of additional troops.

The first of Scott's desperately needed reinforcements ran into serious trouble due to the large guerrilla force now in control of the route to Puebla. Brigadier General George Cadwalader arrived at Veracruz on June 1 with the first element of troops dispatched from the Rio Grande. While Cadwalader awaited the remainder of his force, Colonel McIntosh left the port city on June 4 with a mixed force of 688 men, 83 of whom were sick. All raw recruits, the command consisted of 170 dragoons, 100 dismounted dragoons, and 418 infantry. They escorted a large train of 128 wagons carrying

⁵⁶ General Order No. 128, April 1847. Army of Occupation, Orders; Headquarters of the Army in Mexico. National Archives: Office of The Adjutant General (Record Group 94)

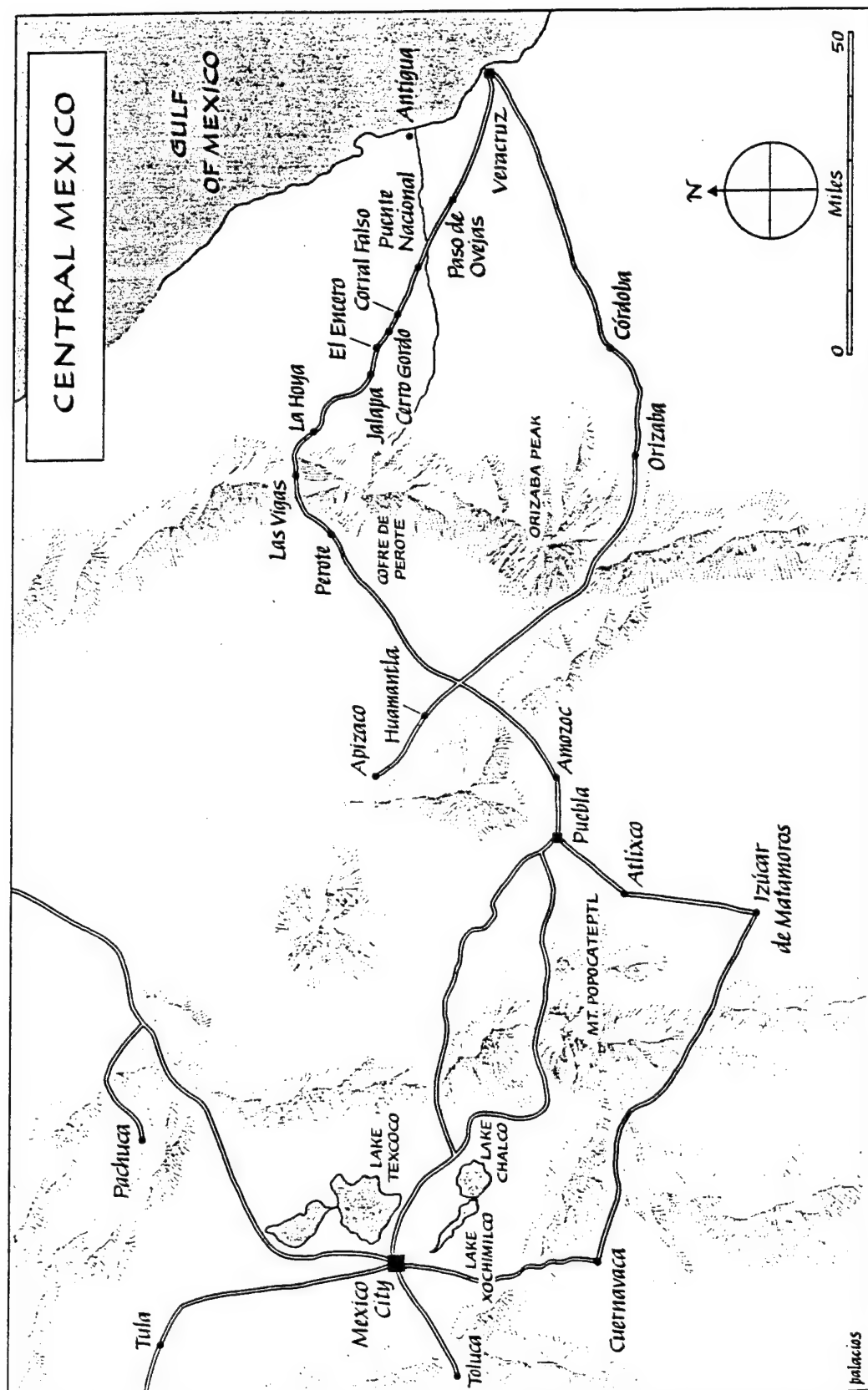
⁵⁷ Winfield Scott, *Memoirs*, p. 466.

⁵⁸ James K Polk, *Polk: The Diary of a President, 1845-1849*, ed. Allan Nevins. (New York: Capricorn Books, 1929), pp. 250-251.

ammunition and \$350,000 in specie, which Scott desperately needed to replenish his treasury since he now had to purchase all of his supplies from the local population. Guerrilla forces in the area learned of the train's departure date and valuable cargo from a Veracruz newspaper that published the exact number of dollars McIntosh would be carrying, and they made immediate plans for its capture.⁵⁹ Colonel McIntosh's misadventures are an excellent example of American transportation difficulties and the threat posed by guerrillas. His first day from Veracruz the train only marched about three miles, and then not all the command reached camp until well past midnight. Scott was in such desperate straits and good draft animals were so scarce that McIntosh was using weak Mexican mustangs and unbroken mules to pull his wagons. Adding to his trouble, most of the drivers were as inexperienced as their animals. Language problems occurred since the wagon masters did not speak Spanish and many of the teamsters were Mexican. American teamsters also had problems because they only spoke English and the few commands the animals knew were in Spanish.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ William B Lane, "What Our Cavalry in Mexico Did and Did Not Do and Other Things," United Service XV (June 1896): 482-503.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 488.



Map reproduced from: Bauer, The Mexican War, p. 262.

Guerrillas began striking the train on the second day. 'Skulkers' slowed progress due to the confusion caused when they fired at teamsters and teams, thus halting all those behind and creating gaps in the line. Sniping from the chaparral became so common that the crack of a Mexican gun signaled a general rush for the bushes. Despite these increased difficulties the train made nine miles that day. Although this was much more acceptable than three miles, that night Colonel McIntosh sent word to Veracruz that he would need more rations and fodder because his quartermaster had not planned for such a slow pace.⁶¹

The command set out at daybreak on June 6, and soon encountered organized resistance. The guerrillas mounted a coordinated attack one hour after the wagons got underway, and while the train was separated as it moved over a low hill. The Mexicans struck the front and forced the advance guard to fall back on the lead wagons, and at the same time the rear guard came under fire from both sides of the trail. As troops screening the middle moved to support both ends, riders charged from a thick woods on the train's right, and were driven off only after a group of dragoons rushed to the center. McIntosh repelled the initial attacks, but remained pinned down for most of the day. In his report he said, "The firing ceased at all points at the same time. This was after sunset and the animals were still without water. I moved at once and came to water sometime after dark at the bridge near Tolome. My camp was more than a mile long." American

⁶¹ Colonel McIntosh's report. U.S. Congress. 30th Congress, 1st Session. Senate Executive Document 1. Message from the President . . . at the Commencement of the First Session of the Thirtieth Congress. Appendix, p. 4.

casualties, excluding civilians, stood at six killed, eighteen wounded and twenty-four wagons destroyed.⁶² The day's action convinced McIntosh that his command was too small to force its way to Jalapa, so that night he sent a messenger to Veracruz requesting immediate reinforcements.⁶³

As the ranking officer for reinforcements and supplies, General Cadwalader received McIntosh's message and quickly moved to rescue the endangered column. He had been "waiting at Vera Cruz for the arrival of a portion of the troops of his brigade, but hastily got together five hundred men, transportation, etc., and marched at once for Colonel McIntosh's camp, which was then several miles farther than his camp of the 6th, at Paso de Ovejas."⁶⁴ Cadwalader linked up with McIntosh on June 10, and took command of both forces. By the afternoon of the next day, the reconstituted column set out for Jalapa, and even before it broke camp the leaders began to receive troubling reports about the road ahead. Cadwalader related that before leaving Paso de Ovejas "we had reason to believe that the enemy in considerable numbers was occupying the commanding positions in our front at the National Bridge [Puente Nacional], and were prepared to resist us at that point."⁶⁵ As Cadwalader soon found out, American intelligence understated the strength of the guerrillas' strong position.

⁶² Ibid. The number of civilian casualties was not included in the report.

⁶³ Lane, "What Our Cavalry in Mexico Did," p. 490.

⁶⁴ General Cadwalader's report. U.S. Congress. 30th Congress, 1st Session. Senate Executive Document 1. Message from the President . . . at the Commencement of the First Session of the Thirtieth Congress. Appendix, p. 18.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Padre Jarauta, in command of this important stretch of road, prepared his irregulars well for their attempt at stopping the American supply column. He controlled a fort on the road just before the bridge "from which they could deliver their fire upon the train at several points." The enemy also occupied the heights on the opposite side of the bridge, and barricaded the span itself. Cadwalader ordered a dual attack to eliminate the threat of taking fire from supporting positions, as would have been the case if each obstacle was taken in turn. Infantry charged the fort commanding the bridge's entrance, while field artillery, supported by two companies of infantry cleared the barricade. The cavalry charged through the ensuing gap and stormed the far heights. Cadwalader suffered thirty-two casualties during the sharp engagement, but attributed this relatively low figure to the fact that part of the engagement took place at night. "Had those positions been forced by daylight, the list of killed and wounded would have been unquestionably greatly augmented."⁶⁶ The American advance reached Jalapa on June 15 with no more major problems. Guerrillas inflicted a grand total of fifty-seven men killed or wounded, out of 1,188, and the march to Puebla was less than half complete.⁶⁷

Padre Jarauta, with some 700 irregulars, still hoped to halt Cadwalader's advance and prepared an ambush at La Hoya Pass, about ten miles west of Jalapa. Unfortunately for the guerrillas, Colonel Francis Wynkoop, in command at Perote, learned of the trap. He warned Cadwalader and dispatched Captain Samuel Walker with a party of Texas Rangers to counter the threat. Walker surprised the guerrillas at their base in Las Vigas

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Lane, "What Our Cavalry in Mexico Did," p. 494.

and destroyed the village on June 20. Later that day, an alerted Cadwalader pushed the guerrillas from their positions at La Hoya Pass. During their flight, Walker struck from the west and scattered the remaining elements of Jarauta's battered force. Cadwalader reached Perote on June 23. Despite Scott's desperate need for reinforcements, Cadwalader decided not to risk the journey's final leg and wait for Major General Gideon Pillow's force of 2,000 men who had departed Veracruz on June 8. Pillow arrived at Perote on July 1, and the combined relief column finally reached Scott at Puebla on August 8.⁶⁸

Guerrillas posed problems, not only for supplies coming into the interior, but also for evacuating casualties back to the coast. After losing the use of an arm from a wound sustained at Cerro Gordo on April 18, 1847, Private Thomas D. Tennery, of the Fourth Illinois Volunteers, had to wait at the hospital in Jalapa until June 8 before enough men could be spared to escort a wagon train back to Veracruz. On June 10 the train, consisting of 140 wounded, came under fire as the Americans crossed a small bridge. A large party of lancers attacked as it crossed and killed four men. The survivors dashed the remaining way, as fast as their wounds would allow, and were amazed when the guerrillas did not give chase. As the astonished Americans crested the next hill they encountered the lead elements of Cadwalader's force double-timing toward the sound of gunfire, and understood why the lancers refused to cross the bridge. The train of

⁶⁸ Bauer, The Mexican War, p. 273.

wounded reached Veracruz safely on the 12th, but endured what seemed continuous harassing fire from "hills in every direction" during the rest of the march.⁶⁹

General Scott faced a serious threat to the success of his invasion from the strong guerrilla presence in Central Mexico. His lines of communication and supply were under constant attack and remained one of his largest concerns throughout the American effort. The examples of McIntosh, Cadwalader, and Tennery show why developing a successful counter-guerrilla strategy was imperative.

⁶⁹ Thomas D Tennery, The Mexican War Diary of Thomas D. Tennery, ed. D. E. Livingston-Little. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), pp. 92-94.

Chapter Two: Active Counter-guerrilla Operations

A group of dusty, leather-clad Mexican riders approached their secluded watering hole at a slow trot. They had ridden most of the night to escape pursuit after striking a small wagon train the day before. The sun had just started its daily task of burning off the clinging mist among the thick chaparral as the weary raiders neared the end of their journey. The place was familiar to both men and horses, so neither noticed slight telltale noises rising from the surrounding cover. Just as the last man dismounted, the pre-dawn silence shattered with the crack of musket fire. Looking up with startled, fearful expressions, the guerrillas watched as the brush, empty and harmless moments before, erupted with wild-eyed, screaming attackers. Confusion reigned as American horses pushed from the surrounding cover. Guerrillas began to fall in writhing heaps as muskets continued to explode. More men collapsed when the riders began banging away with their revolvers. Some guerrillas had time to fire once before falling, and others struggled to remount their terrified, snorting horses. Bloody sabers rose and fell in the swirling melee, and more guerrillas died. The screams slowly became fewer and finally stopped. Sprawled in lifeless heaps, corpses littered the ground around the watering hole, but pounding hooves in the distance announced that a few irregulars escaped the American ambush. The air filled with victorious shouts, and as the attackers looked around, their eyes shown with the fear and excitement of combat. Another successful counter-guerrilla strike came to a close. Although fictional, the attack described above

shows the speed and effectiveness that characterized American counter-guerrilla operations. Similar scenes occurred in all theaters throughout the conflict.

The guerrillas presented a serious and viable threat to the American war effort through successful attacks on supply and communications. How then did the United States counter that threat? One major aspect of the American counter-guerrilla effort was the practice of actively hunting down guerrilla bands. Officers took the initiative rather than reacting to the enemy. Guerrillas conducted several successful operations, but more often than not, the Americans dictated the scope and nature of the conflict. Keys to the success of these operations were the use of native auxiliaries, flexibility in tactical execution, and a proactive attitude. The use of 'search and destroy' as a heading makes no inference to guerrilla operations during the Vietnam conflict, but simply describes the American mind-set during the Mexican War when hunting guerrillas. They actively sought opportunities to strike and did so with the intention of completely destroying their unconventional opponent. In this facet of the overall counter-guerrilla effort, American determination matched that of the Mexicans when they promised a 'war without pity.'

Search and Destroy

The first step in the Army's counter-guerrilla procedure was to send out highly mobile and aggressive strike forces to hunt down Mexican irregulars. The most effective officer in this type of action was Brigadier General Joseph Lane, who commanded a

volunteer brigade that transferred from Taylor's command in September 1847.¹ Scott gave him the task of clearing guerrillas off the road from Veracruz to Mexico City. His brigade consisted of five companies of Texas Rangers, one company of Louisiana cavalry, the 4th Ohio and the 4th Indiana volunteer infantry companies, and two batteries of light artillery. The majority of his troops were heavily armed; each mounted soldier carried a rifle, a pair of black powder pistols, one or two Colt revolvers, and a various assortment of knives and sabers.²

Shortly after the fall of Mexico City, President Santa Anna attempted to seize Puebla, which stood roughly halfway between the capital and the coast, and thereby cut Scott's line of communication to the sea. He hoped to force a retreat from Scott's position in Mexico City, and thus achieve through unconventional means what his regular Army was not able to accomplish on the battlefield. In mid-September 1847, a Mexican force of some 4,000 soldiers and guerrillas under Brigadier General Joaquin Rea attacked the city. After being repelled in the initial assault by the American garrison led by Brevet Colonel Thomas Childs, Rea besieged Puebla until Santa Anna arrived on September 22.³

Lane's brigade landed at Veracruz on September 19. Upon learning of the Mexican offensive, he pushed forward to relieve the embattled American defenders, but in his haste he ran into supply problems and needed to send back to Veracruz for

¹ Bauer, The Mexican War, p. 328.

² Albert G. Brackett, General Lane's Brigade in Central Mexico (Cincinnati: H.W. Derby & Co., 1854), p. 174.

³ Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War, p. 337.

additional ammunition after defeating guerrillas at the National Bridge. Despite these problems he reached Jalapa by October 1. While there Lane received alarming reports from Puebla, so he set a grueling pace for the men as they took up the march the next day, and reached Perote on October 5. After incorporating additional troops, Lane's force now numbered about 3,300 men and seven pieces of artillery.⁴ In response to the American advance, Santa Anna detached the majority of his command and marched to intercept Lane's relief column. The two forces met near Puebla at the Battle of Huamantla on October 9.

Early in the morning spies reported Santa Anna's location, and Lane immediately marched to meet him. Leaving a substantial guard at his camp, Lane took with him five artillery pieces and some 1,800 men. In the van rode Captain Samuel Walker with 200 cavalry.⁵ About three miles from town, Walker spotted a party of Mexican horsemen fleeing toward the city. Lane ordered him to pursue, but if he encountered serious resistance he was to wait for the infantry to move up in support. Walker's riders reached

⁴ Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 176.

⁵ Born in Maryland around 1810, Samuel Hamilton Walker went to Texas in 1836, and became a captain of John C. Hays' Texas Rangers. As a member of the Mier Expedition, Walker and his companions, were captured by Mexicans in December 1842, but escaped in February of 1843. After being recaptured, Mexican authorities imprisoned Walker and his fellow survivors at Perote. He escaped death when he did not draw a black bean during the famous Black Bean Episode, but his father and brother were both executed. On April 11, 1846, Walker joined Taylor's troops on the Rio Grande as a member of John Hays' regiment. After Monterrey, Walker transferred to Scott's army, where he fought under General Lane. Due to his daring exploits on the frontier, and excellent service in the war, Walker achieved a degree of fame, and was respected and admired in the American Army. See; George Ballentine, Autobiography of an English Soldier in the United States Army (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1986), p. 243.

the outskirts of town and after forming up for a charge, raced through to the central square, where Santa Anna had placed four cannons and a strong barricade. Instead of waiting for reinforcements, Walker ordered a general assault. His men took the guns in the first charge, but infantry pushed the riders back. Santa Anna moved more men to the plaza, and Walker's command began to take fire from all sides. At this point the famous Ranger received a mortal wound from a civilian shooting out of a nearby window, but before he died he encouraged his men by saying, "Don't surrender boys; the infantry will soon be here." His men retired to the relative protection of a defensible church and waited for help. Lane, upon hearing the volume of fire, cried to his troops, "Take it cool, my boys, but run like the devil!" With the arrival of Lane's winded but eager infantry, Santa Anna's command broke and scattered in all directions. In the battle the Americans lost thirteen killed and eleven wounded, while Mexican losses stood roughly at 200.⁶

Although suffering relatively few casualties for an operation of this size, the men became enraged at hearing the immensely popular Walker had fallen. They went on a destructive rampage and sacked the town, the only occurrence of such during the war.⁷ Ramón Alcaez reported the incident from the Mexican perspective by saying, "The enemy robbed all the buildings, sacking private houses, assassinating the unhappy inmates who did not immediately comply with their wishes, and in fact were committing all manner of outrages, so that even the American chiefs had to endeavor, but in vain, to

⁶ Brackett, Lane's Brigade, pp. 88-89; Lane to Scott, Oct. 18, 1847, U.S. Congress, 30th Congress, 1st Session, House Executive Document 60. Mexican War Correspondence, p. 1031; Justin Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 179.

⁷ Bauer, The Mexican War, p. 331.

stop them.”⁸ That evening Lane regained control and ordered the march to Puebla to continue the next day. He reached the besieged city on October 12 and after a short engagement with Rea’s overmatched command, he entered the city to the cheers of the American garrison who had been cut off for nearly a month, during which time the defenders lost fifty-seven men killed or wounded.⁹

Lane decided to give Rea no chance to take the initiative and ordered his men to be ready to march in the next few days. He planned an attack on the city of Atlixco, a known base for guerrilla operations, where Rea was trying to reconstitute his force. On October 14, his command set out from Puebla with about 1,500 men. Many of those chosen had marched so far and fast in the last month that they needed to borrow or buy shoes before leaving the city. At four in the afternoon on the 18th, Lane’s cavalry encountered a strong force of guerrillas in good defensive positions along the road. He moved the infantry up, and began a day long running fight in which the Mexicans “holding some good position and protected by chaparral, could make a stand against cavalry, but when the infantry came up they always fled.”¹⁰

Lane reached the bluffs around Atlixco after sunset, and decided a night assault on the city would be too dangerous as “we were perfectly unacquainted with it.” He ordered the artillery to open fire and “commence battering down the town.”¹¹ Using the full moon and then lights from burning buildings to acquire their targets, the American

⁸ Alcarez, The Other Side, p. 402.

⁹ Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 355.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹¹ Brackett, Lane’s Brigade, p. 149.

guns pounded the town into submission. After holding their positions for nearly an hour, the guerrilla force broke, at which point Lane ordered his cavalry to pursue while the infantry secured the city. Mexican sources estimated their losses at two hundred nineteen killed and over three hundred wounded, the majority sustained during the bombardment.¹² American casualties stood at one dragoon killed, two men wounded, and one missing.¹³ Rea, with two cannons and the remnants of his force, fled to Izucar de Matamoros. General Lane summed up the importance of the operation and revealed some of his philosophy in fighting a 'war without pity' in his report to the Secretary of War:

Scarcely ever has a more rapid forced march been made than this, or one productive of better results. Atlixco has been the head-quarters of the Guerrilleros [sic] in this section of the country, and of late the seat of government of this State. From here all expeditions have been fitted out against our troops. So much terror has been impressed upon them, at thus having war brought to their own homes, that I am inclined to believe they will give us no more trouble.¹⁴

Atlixco stands as an excellent example of how combined arms columns, taking the initiative, could devastate guerrillas in well planned and executed search and destroy missions.

Once again Lane pressed his advantage before the guerrillas had time to organize a concentrated resistance. His command returned to Puebla and enjoyed twelve days of

¹² Lane to Scott, Oct. 18, 1847, U.S. Congress, 30th Congress, 1st Session, House Executive Document 60. Mexican War Correspondence, p. 1031.

¹³ Brackett, Lane's Brigade, p. 151.

¹⁴ Lane to Marcy. U.S. Congress, 30th Congress, 2d Session. House Executive Document 1. Message from the President . . . at the Commencement of the Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress, pp. 75-76.

well-earned rest. Lane followed the successful attack on Atlixco with an expedition against the guerrilla stronghold at Tlascala on October 29, which netted two guerrillas killed and some twenty prisoners. After his defeat at Atlixco, Rea kept out of sight, despite several scouting missions sent out by Lane to determine the whereabouts of his enemy. On November 9, Lane got word from several Puebla merchants, that Rea had captured one of their wagon trains and taken it to Tlascala. He sent a detachment of four hundred picked men in pursuit, and on November 15 they entered the town only to find that Rea and the majority of his command had fled. The operation was not completely fruitless because they did capture Miguel Romero, Mariano Mexcas and Lieutenant José María García, all considered by the Americans to be notorious guerrilla leaders in their own right.¹⁵

Lane finally caught up with Rea at Izucar de Matamoros after he learned the Mexican general had outfitted a strong command and was preparing to conduct concentrated attacks on American supply lines to Mexico City. Lane set out on November 22 with 160 cavalry, including, two companies of Texas Rangers under Colonel Jack Hays. Illustrating Lane's tactical flexibility, he took only his best cavalry, all well mounted, because he wanted to strike Rea unaware and capture the elusive general. On November 24, Lane swept into the city and scattered the small Mexican garrison. Although Rea was not there, the strike force killed sixty defenders, captured three cannons and rescued twenty-one American prisoners. On the march back to

¹⁵ Brackett, Lane's Brigade, p. 188.

Puebla, Rea finally appeared with nearly five hundred lancers. A running fight ensued in which Colonel Hays personally led several charges to aid threatened sections of the command. Rea did not press his numerical advantage, and the Americans escaped with only two troopers killed and two wounded.¹⁶ Rea finally had enough of the relentless pursuit offered by General Lane, and in February 1848, he applied to Mexican authorities for permission to leave the country and the guerrilla war.¹⁷

Although Rea left the fight, Lane continued hunting guerrillas at a break-neck pace. He switched his base of operations from Puebla to Mexico City in December 1847. General Scott held Lane in such high regard that the American commander placed him in charge of every major counter-guerrilla operation until the end of the war. Lane's first significant action from his new base was an attempt to capture Santa Anna. He left Mexico City on January 18, 1848, with a mixed command of 350 Mounted Riflemen, dragoons, and Texas Rangers. For security reasons Lane did not reveal to his men their intended objective until after traveling through Puebla on January 20. Despite security precautions, Santa Anna learned of Lane's advance from a coach that passed the Americans on the road outside Santa Clara on January 21, 1848. The now former President fled the approaching American column and escaped, although he needed to leave much of his personal baggage behind.¹⁸ Even though the expedition failed to achieve its original goal, Lane took the opportunity to strike several known guerrilla

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 188-191.

¹⁷ Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 179.

¹⁸ Brackett, Lane's Brigade, pp. 234-247.

bases in towns still controlled by the Mexicans. He rode south and seized Orizaba on January 25, and three days later captured Cordova. Colonel Charles Bankhead moved up from Veracruz and occupied both cities in mid-February. Lane returned to Mexico City on February 10, after winning the operation's only major confrontation against Colonel Manuel Falcón on February 8.¹⁹

Fittingly, Lane commanded in the last major engagement of the war when he went after Padre Jarauta who was operating some 120 miles northeast of Mexico City. On February 17, he left the city with a mounted force of nearly 1,000 men, consisting of five companies of Texas Rangers under Hays, the 3d Dragoons, and Colonel Manuel Dominguez's entire Spy Company. Striking at dawn on February 25 with complete surprise, Lane engaged Jarauta's force of 500 guerrillas near the mountain village of Sequalteplán. The guerrillas, out-gunned and ill-prepared, lost over 100 killed and 40 taken prisoner, while Lane suffered only four killed and five wounded in the one-sided battle. The Padre once again escaped capture and the victorious Americans returned to Mexico City.²⁰

The foremost objective in all Lane's operations was, as his men put it, to "pound the rust off the guerrillas."²¹ Lane pushed his men hard, but they seemed to understand

¹⁹ Bauer, The Mexican War, p. 335.

²⁰ Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Fifty Years in Camp and Field, ed. W.A. Croffut (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909), p. 322; Henry W. Barton, Texas Volunteers in the Mexican War (Wichita Falls, Texas: Waco Texas, 1970), p. 115; U.S. Congress. 30th Congress, 2d Session. House Executive Document 1. Message from the President . . . at the Commencement of the Second Session of the Thirtieth Congress, pp. 95-103.

²¹ Brackett, Lane's Brigade, p. 232.

their general's objectives and the importance of counter-guerrilla operations. They realized he expected them to perform a dangerous job, but respected him for his courage and energy. Lane's held an excellent reputation in the rest of the Army as an aggressive commander. Upon hearing that it was Lane who marched to end the siege, the Puebla defenders felt a great sense of relief because they knew "he would rather fight than eat."²² Indicative of Lane's tactical flexibility was his willingness to alter the composition of his command as the unconventional threat changed. When the guerrillas were organized and concentrated, like at Atlixco, Lane used a combined arms approach and relied heavily on field artillery. As the guerrillas became more dispersed and elusive, he primarily used cavalry troops in order to gain mobility and surprise. General Lane's actions in Central Mexico illustrate the effectiveness of a large aggressive strike force, but American officers applied the same idea on a smaller scale throughout the country.

On December 12, 1847, General Scott issued a general order "to insure vigor and uniformity in the pursuit of *Guerillas* [sic, emphasis Scott]." He required every American post in Mexico to "daily push detachments or patrols as far as practicable, to disinfest the neighborhood, its roads and places of concealment."²³ During the summer of 1847, elements of the Pennsylvania Volunteers garrisoned Perote, and "were constantly on the National Road, and other roads, hunting and fighting guerillas [sic]." By the end of July, one private declared in exasperation, "during the skirmishes with the infernal guerillas [sic], we suffered more frightfully than at the battle of Cerro Gordo

²² Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War, p. 316.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

with the regular Mexican Army.”²⁴ Although tiresome, this constant pressure on guerrillas from frequent patrols kept them off balance and made it harder for them to organize.

Captain Benjamin McCulloch’s company of Texas Rangers became adept at turning the tables on guerrilla troops through the use of ambushes. Even though these troops served in the North, under General Taylor, and worked on a much smaller scale than General Lane, the concept behind their operations remained the same. Both commanders tried to disrupt the Mexican partisan forces before the irregulars could mount their own expeditions. Operating proactively near the northern city of Monterrey, a group of fifty Rangers ambushed a guerrilla band of over two hundred men led by the former bandit chieftain El Mocho at a secluded watering hole. The Mexican irregulars suffered huge casualties including their leader. Other guerrilla parties in the area learned to avoid well known springs because this group of Rangers regularly ambushed partisans as they came to replenish their water supply.²⁵

In a flawless counter-guerrilla raid in early November 1847, Colonel Francis Wynkoop and a company of Texas Rangers struck Colonel Rebolledo’s Central Mexico headquarters at Halcomola Ranch. The Americans achieved complete surprise and captured every guerrilla in the building except one who they shot while he attempted to flee. Included among the prisoners were Rebolledo and two Mexican officers who had broken their paroles by joining the guerrilla band. On November 24, a military

²⁴ Ibid., p. 216.

²⁵ Smith, Chile Con Carne, p. 108 and p. 286.

commission at Jalapa tried the two officers and sentenced them to death by firing squad. Rebolledo escaped being shot due to the impassioned defense of an American named Kennedy who lived in Jalapa. The court accepted Kennedy's pleas for leniency due to Rebolledo's reputation as a humane leader, and allowed him to spend the rest of the war in prison.²⁶

Wynkoop achieved similar success later in the war when he captured Major General Gabriel Valencia on January 2. Originally in pursuit of Jarauta, Wynkoop found the Padre's reported position deserted, but learned that Valencia was spending the night at a hacienda eighteen miles away. His command of two Ranger companies rode hard, arriving late in the night. The Colonel surrounded the house and ordered the inhabitants into the yard. A paroled officer named Silea came to the door and said General Valencia was not present. Wynkoop disagreed and announced that if Valencia did not appear he would burn the house to the ground. At this point Valencia came to the door in his night cloths and chastised the Colonel for attacking a man in his own house in the dead of night. Colonel Wynkoop apologized for the inconvenience before placing the Mexican general in chains.²⁷

Small unit counter-guerrilla operations illustrated the American officer corps's belief in decentralized execution that allowed individual commanders to use their own initiative when hunting irregulars. Colonel Hays's adjutant, John S. Ford, commanded Company E of the Texas Rangers in mid-October, 1847. His assignment was to guard

²⁶ Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 423; Bauer, The Mexican War, p. 334.

²⁷ Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War, pp. 437-438.

the road to Jalapa from Vergara, a small community three miles from Veracruz. He received reports of a guerrilla base about thirty miles away, operating against the line of communication to the interior, and convinced Major General Robert Patterson, then in command at Veracruz, to allow an expedition against the hacienda. His company officers planned and organized the strike, which consisted of one hundred nineteen men with detachments from Companies E, K, and I. They found the hacienda deserted upon their arrival, but discovered a large cache of arms and stolen United States supplies. They burned the ranch and returned to camp by sundown.²⁸

Not all small unit operations succeeded. At times the Mexican guerrillas overmatched the Americans, which happened most often when the American force organized on an ad hoc basis. On May 2, 1847, a party of Illinois volunteers outside Veracruz decided to hunt down the band of guerrillas who had killed several of their friends the previous day. The posse's spur-of-the-moment expedition resulted in catastrophe for the volunteers. Late in the afternoon, while the Americans filled their canteens at a stream, the Mexican quarry attacked and roped two soldiers, stabbing them to death before the other volunteers could react. This loss caused even more anger in the Illinois camp, and the Third and Fourth Regiments decided to pursue the guerrillas to extract revenge. General Pillow heard of the plan and immediately ordered the regiments to stand down. He issued strict orders that no soldier was to leave camp without a written notice from himself. He declared to the men that this "straggling, carousing out

²⁸ Barton, Texas Volunteers, pp. 112-113.

from camp must and shall be stopped. It has caused us more lives than we lost in battles."²⁹ Another instance of the guerrillas gaining the upper hand against would-be pursuers occurred outside Puebla in August 1847. A group of thirty-two teamsters, army followers, and off-duty soldiers decided to hunt a local guerrilla band operating in the countryside. The guerrillas, with more numbers and superior firepower, cut the Americans apart in an ambush within sight of the city. Only ten men returned; the guerrillas killed or captured the remainder.³⁰

The success of well-planned operations, especially when contrasted with the failures of ad hoc expeditions, demonstrated the advantage of a centralized command that provided organization, while at the same time allowed its officers to use their own initiative and imagination.

Native Auxiliaries

Another important aspect in actively combating guerrillas was the use of indigenous Mexicans as guides, scouts, interpreters, and irregular troops to counter the guerrillas' familiarity with the terrain and to overcome language problems. Using indigenous troops was not new to many of the men who served on the frontier before the war.³¹ A favorite tactic in Indian fighting was to recruit warriors from an enemy tribe to

²⁹ Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War, p. 153.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

³¹ John G. Bourke, On the Border with Crook (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1971). This book, reproduced from the 1891 edition published by Charles Scribner's Sons, gives an idea of the Army's long tradition of using Native American auxiliaries.

act as scouts and irregulars. Among McCulloch's Texas Rangers an on-going debate raged whether an Indian, a Mexican, or a white frontiersman made a better scout.³² Throughout the war Brigadier General David Twiggs employed a Mexican guide. He required this native to know the local area and to act as an interpreter.³³ Twiggs was not the only American commander to make use of a native guide. Brigadier General Franklin Pierce asked local political leaders along his line of march to assign two escorts to help direct his advance.³⁴ In another instance, a Mexican woman volunteered to work as a spy for the Americans during the siege of Puebla. On October 11, she walked boldly through the Mexican siege lines with a letter sewn inside her dress from General Lane. The note described his victory at Huamantla and told the garrison not to give up hope because he would arrive soon.³⁵

Although Mexican guides and spies proved useful in combating guerrillas, one band of men, known as the 'Mexican Spy Company,' played a starring role in the process. A celebrated robber-chieftain, Manuel Dominguez, offered the United States Army his services and those of his men. In Puebla on June 23, 1847, Brigadier General William Worth arrested Dominguez because Mexican officials identified him as a criminal. Dominguez was understandably upset for being incarcerated on the recommendation of his own people. He therefore applied to Lieutenant Colonel Ethan

³² Samuel C. Reid, The Scouting Expeditions of McCulloch's Texas Rangers (Freeport, New York: Books For Libraries Press, 1847), p. 114.

³³ Ballentine, Autobiography of an English Soldier, p. 145.

³⁴ Franklin Pierce, quoted in Nathaniel Hawthorne, Life of Franklin Pierce (Boston: Tichnor, Reed & Fields, 1852), p. 92.

³⁵ Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War, p. 339.

Hitchcock to work for the Americans in exchange for his release. Hitchcock, General Scott's Inspector General and Chief of Covert Operations, had the power to grant this request if he so wished. The notorious bandit intrigued Hitchcock. Dominguez was a large muscular man who worked as a weaver when he was not on the highway practicing his other profession of banditry. Because of his stature, his men jokingly referred to him as the "little chief."³⁶ After a long career terrorizing travelers between Veracruz and Mexico City, Dominguez went into semi-retirement and was quietly living in the area with his wife and nine children. His neighbors and the local police, frightened by the infamous robber, had left him unmolested until the Americans took control of the town.

As a test of reliability, the Colonel asked Dominguez to deliver a relatively unimportant letter from General Scott to the United States garrison at Veracruz. Dominguez performed the duty, returning to Puebla by July 3. Hitchcock, with Scott's approval, decided to strike a bargain with the brigand. For a fee of one hundred ten dollars, Dominguez said he would bring together under his leadership his old group of bandits. As part of building this force he persuaded Hitchcock to release several friends and compatriots from local prisons. The United States Army agreed to pay each man of the Mexican Spy Company twenty dollars a month, and Dominguez promised to expand his group by converting guerrillas over to the American side. He also believed he could capture the local guerrilla chiefs and bring them in as prisoners. Colonel Hitchcock was skeptical, but he believed the money to be well spent, even if Dominguez did not fulfill

³⁶ Alcarez, The Other Side, p. 299.

his promises, because every bandit the United States employed removed one who could turn to the guerrillas.³⁷ Interestingly enough, Mexican commanders used the same rationale in recruiting. General Rea justified his employment of bandits as irregulars by saying that his guerrillas “were in the field because honorable men were not; and that, had not the government condoned their crimes, they would have served the Americans as counter-guerrillas [sic].”³⁸

The Spy Company, or the “Forty Thieves” as some Americans called them, proved invaluable in Scott’s march to Mexico City and the following occupation. Acting individually or collectively, as the situation dictated, they served as scouts, guides, interpreters, couriers, and irregular troops.³⁹ Hitchcock contended that Dominguez and his men were such successful messengers that they were the only reliable means of keeping in contact with Veracruz once Scott took Mexico City.⁴⁰ When Hitchcock heard rumors of enemy troops massing at Atlixco, he said the only way to determine their validity was to “get the Captain of his Bandits to inquire into it.”⁴¹ In his Report No. 43, to the Secretary of War on January 13, 1848, Scott commended the Spy Company twice for two different types of action. In the first case, he told how a group of the Company escorted a special messenger from Veracruz to Mexico City, and he emphasized the difficulty and importance of that task in keeping abreast of Washington’s wishes. He

³⁷ Ethan Allen Hitchcock, Fifty Years in Camp and Field, ed. W.A. Croffut (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1909), p. 264.

³⁸ Rea, quoted in Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 173.

³⁹ Anderson, An Artillery Officer, p. 266.

⁴⁰ Hitchcock, Fifty Years in Camp and Field, p. 352.

⁴¹ Hitchcock, quoted in Anderson, An Artillery Officer, p. 266.

then praised Dominguez for independently attacking a large body of guerrillas and capturing two general officers.⁴² The operation Scott was referring to occurred during December 1848, when Dominguez and his band captured the Mexican Generals Anastasio Torrejon and Antonio Gaona. These men, who had been leading guerrilla troops near Puebla, were given to American soldiers for incarceration where they remained until the ratification of the peace treaty.⁴³

Native auxiliaries further illustrated their importance in the counter-guerrilla conflict with their actions between Veracruz and Puebla in late June. A Mexican spy, who would later be recruited by Dominguez, warned Colonel Francis Wynkoop, the American commander at Perote, of guerrillas assembling to ambush General George Cadwalader's force marching from Jalapa. Wynkoop dispatched Captain Samuel H. Walker's company of Texas Rangers to counter the Mexican assault. The spy guided Walker from Perote under the cover of darkness to the enemy camp at Las Vigas. The Rangers surprised the Mexican force with a dawn attack and routed the enemy in the ensuing battle. Cadwalader's column safely reached Perote the next day in large part due to the skill and effectiveness of the Mexican irregular.⁴⁴

The Spy Company faced numerous dangers in working for the Americans. Mexican guerrillas relentlessly pursued them when they acted as couriers between Veracruz and Mexico City. At first the men would conceal messages between the soles

⁴² Scott, *Memoirs*, pp. 567-568.

⁴³ Brackett, *General Lane's Brigade*, p. 222.

⁴⁴ Ballentine, *Autobiography of an English Soldier*, p. 235.

of their shoes and pretend to be ordinary citizens, but as the Spy Company's fame increased, they had to rely more on a fast horse and their knowledge of the terrain to escape pursuit. If caught these men could expect death by torture at the hands of their countrymen. The usual penalty for spies or couriers was for guerrillas to hang them from their heels, and watch them die in agony.⁴⁵ In addition, several lost their lives in skirmishes against their countrymen as the Dominguez band fought alongside its American employers.⁴⁶ Not all Americans felt grateful for the contributions of the Forty Thieves. Lieutenant Raphael Semmes, Aide-de-camp of General Worth, believed that Dominguez and his men "brought more discredit on our arms by their pilfering and bad behavior, than was compensated for by any service they performed."⁴⁷

The Mexican populace viewed the Spy Company even more negatively because it saw them as traitors. When Dominguez entered Mexico City with the American troops his presence among the conquerors shocked and appalled many of his countrymen. General Pedro Maria Anaya, captured earlier at Churubusco, was so overcome with anger that he broke ranks and exploded at the "insolent little chief, calling him traitor, at the risk of his own life."⁴⁸ Dominguez's wife, fearing for her life, fled from Puebla while her husband was carrying messages to Veracruz. She disguised herself and slipped out of town in front of an angry mob. She later returned but could no longer go to the market

⁴⁵ Curtis, Mexico Under Fire, p. 263.

⁴⁶ Oswaldel, Notes of the Mexican War, p. 362.

⁴⁷ Raphael Semmes, The Campaign of General Scott in the Valley of Mexico (Cincinnati: Moore & Anderson, 1852), p. 163.

⁴⁸ Alcarez, The Other Side, p. 299.

safely, so under Special Order No. 10, dated May 3, 1848, the American quartermaster issued her five rations a day from the commissary to feed her family.⁴⁹ At the end of May, 1848, Dominguez learned that guerrillas murdered his oldest son. He returned to the area and killed five of those responsible. While there, the Mexican police arrested one of Dominguez's men, but they released him after the captain told the jailers of the destruction he would cause if they did not set his follower free.⁵⁰ After the war, Dominguez was so unpopular in Mexico, because of his service to the Americans, that he requested permission to travel back to the United States with other American troops in June 1848. He declared he would be "killed like a dog if he remained in Mexico."⁵¹ Hitchcock disbanded the Spy Company at Veracruz on June 5, 1848, and gave each departing member a twenty dollar bonus for his service during the conflict. Dominguez and his family sailed to New Orleans shortly after on an American transport where they lived in poverty while Hitchcock tried to persuade Congress to grant the old bandit a pension for his service. The government denied his petition and the fate of Dominguez became unknown.⁵²

Aggressive counter-guerrilla operations and the use of indigenous troops helped limit the effectiveness of Mexico's irregular forces by seizing the initiative from the guerrillas. American commanders displayed remarkable flexibility in planning and

⁴⁹ Special Order No. 10. Department of Puebla, May 3, 1848. National Archives: Office of The Adjutant General (Record Group 94)

⁵⁰ Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War, p. 581.

⁵¹ Dominguez, quoted in Hitchcock, Fifty Years in Camp and Field, p. 330.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 343.

tactical execution, thus illustrating the importance of a strong central command that provided organization without stifling independent action.

Chapter Three: Civilian Conciliation

Awaiting the condemned, a makeshift scaffold rose from the sun-baked earth. Drums beat a slow, mournful march as a blue-clad figure emerged from dead shadows. His escort marched in lock step, keeping pace with the incessant drum as the deadly silent crowd parted on both sides. The unwilling charge stumbled, moaning soft terrified sounds just below a whimper, as he moved inexorably toward his fate. In the eyes of the damned, the scaffold grew to obscene proportions. At the stairs the prisoner's moans ceased, only to be replaced by an internal, screaming, repetitive 'NO' crashing through his skull. The blindfold, tied in a rough knot, came first. Following quickly, a noose slipped easily over the prisoner's neck. The man, in a sweat stained uniform, heard the beating drum halt with unforgiving authority, and felt a gut wrenching drop as the stool beneath him was kicked away. Only the creak of the swaying rope could be heard in the plaza as the corpse swayed in an ironically gentle Mexican breeze. The crowd's black bullet-hole eyes revealed less than their stony faces as the city's population slowly filed from the square. In ranks, along the plaza edge, American soldiers watched the body of a comrade pulled from the executioner's noose. Horror, indignation, and disbelief chased across their faces. The dead man had raped a young Mexican girl and left her, bloody and battered, to die. Instead of perishing she crawled to a nearby hut, and the next day identified her attacker. After a brutally efficient military trial, the rapist was condemned to hang by a square jawed officer with no hint of pity in his eyes. The sentence had just been carried out.

The above scene is the author's reconstruction of a rapist's execution observed by Colonel Hitchcock at Veracruz, which he described as "a dreadful scene."¹ The story shows General Scott's level of commitment to a policy of conciliation, even when it called for the death of an American soldier. An important factor limiting the impact of guerrillas was the Army's policy of conciliation toward Mexican civilians. Several times during the war similar scenes occurred in the hope that the Mexican people would tolerate American occupation, and deprive guerrillas of their support. The term 'conciliation' is appropriate for this war, not only because that is the word Scott used to describe his actions, but also because pacification, a term commonly heard in unconventional warfare literature, does not apply. Though similar, the words hold a subtle but important difference. The American Heritage Dictionary defines conciliate as "to overcome distrust or animosity through pleasant behavior," while pacify means "a reduction to peaceful submission." Far from an exercise in semantics, the two words connote a different attitude when referring to military occupation. Scott's choice of the word 'conciliate' illustrates his understanding of the situation, and the degree of thought he devoted to the guerrilla problem. Scott did not want to reduce the population into submission, but instead hoped, through friendly means, to deprive guerrillas of the people's support.

¹ Hitchcock, quoted in John Edward Weems, To Conquer a Peace: The War Between the United States and Mexico (College Station: Texas A&M University, 1974), p. 357.

From the beginning, Scott understood that he did not have enough men, nor would he ever receive enough, to pacify the entire population. He was able to invade Central Mexico and eventually control the capital city only because the general population allowed such a move. He depended on the people for his supplies, to use as auxiliary troops,² and always kept in mind that his success depended on keeping them conciliated. He did not need them to support his efforts, although those that did contributed to success. What he most needed was the people to feel that they had more to lose by attacking Americans than if they simply allowed events to occur and stayed basically neutral during the guerrilla struggle.

The American officer corps remained cognizant of the danger a truly enraged Mexican population would pose to its small invading force. Both General Taylor and General Scott issued proclamations to the Mexican people with each invasion. These proclamations stressed that United States troops would not deprive civilians of their private property or deny them the right to practice Catholicism.³ General Taylor faced a more serious guerrilla problem in the North because he had a difficult time controlling his volunteers, who made up ninety percent of his army after most of the regulars shifted south to Scott's command.⁴ Scott's policy consisted of three main categories: exploiting the poor relations between guerrillas and the people, providing security for Mexican civilians, and courting a good relationship with the Catholic Church. Each of these

² Auxiliary troops refers to Mexicans working for the Americans in direct support of military operations, such as The Spy Company mentioned in Chapter Two.

³ Kenly, Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer, p. 57 and p. 255.

⁴ Millet and Maslowski, For the Common Defense, p. 154.

factors was an integral component in the conciliation process, and each acted in conjunction with the other two to achieve Scott's goal of overcoming animosity through pleasant behavior.

Poor Relations Between Guerrillas and Civilians

The Army under Scott had an additional asset in its struggle to conciliate the Mexican people. Many times civilians were more afraid of their own troops, and especially Mexican guerrillas, than they were of American forces. Although this facet of conciliation could not be controlled in the same manner as the other factors, it made the task of conciliation easier because the Mexican military, regular and guerrilla, alienated many civilians with their high-handed ways and sometimes brutal actions. The Mexican army that surrendered at Veracruz ravaged the countryside as its soldiers progressed into the interior because they ran out of food during the recent siege. The "waste by pillage and fire" the army inflicted on its own people shocked Robert Anderson.⁵ Some desperate circumstances in war, such as the Veracruz siege, justify the requisitioning of supplies from civilians, but even Mexican historians say those who "executed the order performed it in such a manner as to make their conduct odious."⁶ As Mexican armies lost battle after battle, the men became disillusioned with the government. Battlefield defeats, and the loss of will that accompanied them, caused "all the dissolute viciousness

⁵ Anderson, An Artillery Officer, p. 110.

⁶ Alcarez, The Other Side, p. 224.

to be expected from certain men, starving, badly treated, and crushed with toil" to surface in the battered remnants of the Mexican Army.⁷

Mexican civilians especially feared the guerrillas. Some bands maintained a good relationship with the general population, but they were usually small local groups. Men who had been bandits before the war comprised the majority of recruits in the larger units, and they continued to prey on the civilian population as well as the American Army.⁸ Logistical problems also contributed to the suffering the guerrillas inflicted on their own people. The Mexican government promised to supply the guerrilla bands, but this pledge was never fulfilled. Wracked by political bickering at the war's outset, the government only became more disorganized as the Americans marched unchecked toward the capital. Struggling just to supply the regular armies, the government provided little tangible support to the guerrillas. While the Americans paid for supplies at a fair market price, guerrillas generally had little money, and thus resorted to force for fulfilling their needs.⁹

Some guerrillas simply hoped to benefit from the chaos of war, and turned to banditry to gain profit. Among those arguing for an expansion of the unconventional war were individuals getting rich from plundering the countryside, and in effect completing the devastation the American Army caused.¹⁰ Henry Lane summarized why the people did not actively support the guerrillas in large numbers when he said that in Mexico,

⁷ Ibid., p. 391.

⁸ Anderson, *An Artillery Officer*, p. 183.

⁹ Ramirez, *Mexico During*, p. 134.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 114.

“there is no security for personal property or personal rights. The people only feel the hand of the government in its confiscations & oppressions.”¹¹

Providing Security

An integral part of Scott's conciliation plan was the effort to provide security for the Mexican civilians. American troops ensured the people's physical safety through their actions in combating Indians and bandits. They also protected the population's financial interests by paying for all requisitioned goods. In order to curb crimes against Mexicans and ensure order in the occupied territories, General Scott took it upon himself to develop a justice system that gave civilians the means to answer their grievances. Contingent on all these attempts to provide civilian security in different areas of life was the importance of discipline in the American ranks. If discipline broke down, the people would suffer from soldiers who did not recognize the damage they caused to Scott's conciliation process, and thus the American war effort as a whole.

The most obvious area in providing security was the use of troops to protect the people's physical safety. The Army found itself chasing simple robbers and marauding Indians, a role the frontier soldiers must have slipped into comfortably. Near Matamoras, McCulluch's Rangers went on a manhunt for a killer at the request of a local Mexican political leader. Setting out on August 3, 1846, they hoped to capture Juan N. Seguin and

¹¹ Henry S. Lane, “The Mexican War Journal of Henry S. Lane.” Indiana Magazine of History, Edited by Graham A. Barringer. LIII (December 1957), pp. 383-434.

his band of nearly forty "cutthroat fellows" from San Antonio. McCulloch reached the village of China by midnight the next day, but did not find Seguin. The murderous bandit fled when the Rangers approached, and the company returned to Camargo empty handed.¹² Although unsuccessful, the mission increased levels of trust by showing the people America's commitment to their security.

The threat to Mexican civilians from marauding Indians caused them to further accept and even request American protection. In another police action for McCulloch's Rangers, his men chased a Comanche raiding party that came south from Texas in hopes of finding the Mexican ranches vulnerable to attack. Captain Walter Lane and his battalion of Texas Rangers also engaged raiding Comanches in order to protect Mexican civilians. The Indians struck a small town near Saltillo called Parras, but did not count on the Americans being there. Upon learning of the pending raid, Lane acted quickly and attacked the Indians as they neared the vicinity. He was glad to protect the frightened civilians because, "Being on friendly terms with the people of the place, the more readily [we] undertook its defense."¹³ During the ensuing battle, the Comanches lost fifteen men, nearly half their total number, while Lane's losses stood at only one wounded rider. In January 1847, Colonel Alexander Doniphan and his 1st Regiment of Missouri Mounted Volunteers battled another Comanche raiding party in Chihuahua. The Americans killed fifteen, and rescued twenty-three Mexican girls from captivity.¹⁴ Some

¹² Reid, The Scouting Expeditions, pp. 78-79; Barton, Texas Volunteers, pp. 44-45.

¹³ Smith, Chile Con Carne, p. 352.

¹⁴ Chamberlain, My Confession, p. 244.

troopers thought protecting the enemy people was an odd duty for an occupying army, but they realized it improved the relationship between the civilians and the American Army.¹⁵ While defending the people from external threats, American troops also worked hard to protect Mexican civilians from their own countrymen.

A part of providing security was to protect civilians from guerrilla attacks. On January 22, 1847, Thomas Tennery of the Illinois Volunteers reported that while on the march several frightened Mexican merchants caught up to his column and asked for help in dealing with guerrillas who were harassing travelers along the road. The Americans sent out a detachment of cavalry to deal with the threat to the civilians, and soon chased a small band of irregulars from the area.¹⁶

Civilians again pleaded to Tennery's unit for protection from guerrillas in February. Several merchants informed Brigadier General James Shields that partisans were robbing travelers along the road. He sent thirty men to investigate and instructed the civilians to proceed as if nothing was out of the ordinary. At the predicted place several guerrillas sprang from concealment, but before they could attack the Mexican informants, the escort made its appearance. The bandits fled before they could be apprehended. Shields ordered four hundred men to search the woods and guard the road, but they could not find the guerrillas. The general then placed a guard at the place in the hope that the robbers would reappear.¹⁷ These extraordinary measures may seem out of

¹⁵ Reid, The Scouting Expeditions, p. 61 and p. 68.

¹⁶ Tennery, The Mexican War Diary, p. 59.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

proportion to the level of threat, but they illustrate American concern over the guerrilla menace, and the officer's commitment to protect civilians.

As part of the conciliation process, American commanders worked with local officials to govern occupied areas jointly. City councils conducted municipal affairs with little interference as long as they kept good order and allowed Americans to buy local products. One method many military governors used to further the conciliation process was to show interest in town improvements, such as proper sanitation, the maintenance of schools, hospitals and prisons, and the establishment of a native police force.¹⁸ The Mexican judicial system was entirely free of American influence as long as no one connected with the Army was on trial, or when local officials asked American commanders to enforce their decisions.¹⁹ Lieutenant Semmes, who was ordinarily very critical of General Scott's actions, found nothing negative to say about American administration of occupied areas.

This mixed system of policy, of making the Mexicans govern themselves, was admirably adapted to accomplish our purposes, which were to conciliate the people, at the same time that we retained sufficient control over affairs, to ensure the safety of the army, and further the objects of the campaign.²⁰

Brigadier General Franklin Pierce regarded the protection American forces offered to civilians to be the most essential part in depriving guerrillas of popular

¹⁸ The most notable commanders who used this method were Smith at Tampico, Worth at Córdoba, Curtis at Matamoros and Childs at Puebla. Childs even received a commendation from a local Mexican Bishop for his dedication to public works and education. For further information see; Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 229.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 229-231.

²⁰ Semmes, The Campaign of General Scott, p. 164.

support. The people were afraid of the partisans who would resort to kidnapping, torture, and murder to enforce their will. Pierce felt that as long as uncertainty existed whether or not the Americans could protect average civilians, the guerrillas would keep their influence and force the people to support their efforts.²¹ Thus, the American emphasis and dedication in providing physical security greatly helped in achieving the goal of conciliation.

Another aspect of providing security for civilians was the American commitment to protect the general population's financial interests. Scott firmly believed the Mexican people feared that the Americans would pillage and destroy on their march to the interior, and that American troops needed to counter this impression in order to eliminate this possible area of discontent. He issued strict orders that all food and supplies taken from the Mexican people needed to be paid for in cash or with a requisition order and appropriate compensation from a local quartermaster. As the cost of the war with Mexico mounted, the Secretary of War began pressuring Scott to place more of the financial burden on the Mexican people. He wanted Scott's army to sustain itself upon the land through the acquisition of Mexican resources.

The right of an army operating in an enemy's country to seize supplies, to forage, and to occupy such buildings, private as well as public, as may be required for quarters, hospitals, storehouses, and other military purposes, without compensation therefore, cannot be questioned; and it is expected that you will not forgo the exercise of this right.²²

²¹ Hawthorne, Life of Franklin Pierce, p. 91.

²² Secretary of War to General Scott. U.S. Congress. 30th Congress, 1st Session. Senate Executive Document 1. Message from the President . . . at the Commencement of the First Session of the Thirtieth Congress, p. 768.

Scott vehemently resisted any such policy shift because he believed that not compensating Mexican civilians for their goods would incite widespread resistance toward the invading American force. He warned Secretary Marcy that the Mexicans “would sooner remove or destroy the products of their farms than allow them to fall into our hands without compensation.”²³ Scott felt so strongly about this issue that in a letter to the Secretary of War on May 20, 1847, he expressed a desire to be relieved of command if further pressured to take supplies from civilians. He went on to predict the disastrous results of such a change in policy. “Not a ration for man or horse would be brought in except by the bayonet, which would oblige the troops to spread themselves out many leagues to the right and left in search of subsistence and to stop all military operations.”²⁴

From that point forward, the Polk administration was more careful in its directives. Marcy and Polk continued to push for acquiring Mexican funds, but always left the manner of collecting fees up to Scott’s discretion. They hoped to defray the cost of invasion by using normal Mexican taxes and duties, thus sparing the common citizen additional hardship. Illustrating this new attitude, Acting Secretary of War John Mason wrote Scott, on September 1, 1847. Mason hoped Scott no longer felt “that forced contributions will exasperate and ruin the inhabitants and starve the army.” Even though he tried to sway Scott to the administrations point of view, he emphasized that the “safety and subsistence of the troops will not be placed in jeopardy by the desire to enforce this

²³ Kenly, Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer, p. 334.

²⁴ Ibid.

system.”²⁵ In an effort to comply with his superiors’ wishes, in November 1847, Scott halted the payment of rent by American troops using Mexican facilities, but continued to pay for supplies and other necessities. On December 15, he ordered that taxes be collected normally, but the revenue would go first to the occupation forces, and then the remainder put to use in maintaining normal government functions.²⁶

The debate over forced contributions illustrates Scott’s exceptional ability as a leader and officer. The general had the courage to stand up to his superiors over a matter that he felt would adversely affect his command. At the same time he remained flexible enough to work out a solution to the finance problem without simply disregarding unrealistic orders.

Other officers shared Scott’s views on the benefits of decently treating the civilian population. Robert Anderson, a captain in the regular artillery, thought the treatment average Mexicans received from the American troops was superior to the way the Mexican elite treated their own people. Anderson argued a change in policy would “excite the common people so much, as to make resistance to the death a cardinal principle with them.”²⁷ Colonel Curtis felt amazed when he received strict orders to protect all the property of peaceable Mexicans.

It seems the rights of these Mexicans are better guaranteed than the rights of our citizens in the states would be, all of whom yield to the well established

²⁵ Mason to Scott, Sept. 1, 1847, U.S. Congress. 30th Congress, 1st Session. House Executive Document 56. Correspondence Between the Secretary of War and Generals Scott and Taylor and Between General Scott and Mr. Trist, pp. 195-196.

²⁶ Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 336.

²⁷ Anderson, An Artillery Officer, p. 24.

law that all the property of citizens may be sacrificed for public uses. The rule may be kind to Mexicans, but it adds much to the expense of our Government.²⁸

General Lane, with all his fierce drive in hunting guerrillas, was extremely sensitive to the concerns of the Mexican civilians when they were not helping those he pursued. Scouting near Monterrey in the war's early stages, a party of Lane's men took corn from an old man and his children. The next morning, he came to Lane's camp to ask for assistance. The general ordered the quartermaster to pay the man, but the farmer received only fifty dollars, which was the most allowed by regulation to pay a single claimant. Lane knew it was not what the corn had been worth, so he gave fifty dollars of his own to the old man to make up the difference.²⁹ Brigadier General David Twiggs took even more drastic measures when he found out several of his men were looting a private house near Jalapa. The general rushed to the establishment and literally took the matter into his own hands. "Two or three of the unlucky wights [sic] he met on the threshold of the door, on their way out; these he seized by the collar and swung round till he had an opportunity of administering a sound kick to their posteriors. None of them, however, stayed to remonstrate on these rather unpleasant demonstrations of the old General's love of justice."³⁰

Regular officers generally courted good relations with Mexican civilians. The soldiers picked up on their officers' concerns and sometimes took advantage of them. In

²⁸ Curtis, Mexico Under Fire, p. 32.

²⁹ Brackett, General Lane's Brigade, p. 75.

³⁰ Ballentine, Autobiography of an English Soldier, p. 274.

May 1847 on a march toward Mexico City, members of the 2nd Pennsylvania Volunteers missed getting provisions at the conclusion of a long day. They demanded food from their commander, but he told them there was none. The angry volunteers rushed to the nearby civilian market, taking all the tortillas made by the local women. The soldiers realized they could not all be punished and even delighted in the knowledge that their officer would feel obliged to pay the market women for what had been taken.³¹

General Scott was careful not to let his conciliatory measures be taken as a sign of weakness. The finance system the general imposed also had a sharp edge when he levied monetary punishments on local leaders if they failed to deliver individuals guilty of committing offenses against American forces. He held the nearest alcalde³² personally responsible for guerrilla attacks on Americans traveling nearby roads. If the politician did not deliver the guilty individuals, Scott levied a fine of \$300 to be collected from the alcalde's personal property.³³ Anderson believed this carrot and stick approach to dealing with the Mexicans offered the best means of achieving conciliation in the area of finance. "Our paying the Mexicans liberally for what they bring will induce them to

³¹ Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War, p.154.

³² An alcalde was a local elected official whose position did not have a counterpart in American politics. His duties included many of the responsibilities of a justice of the peace, judge, and mayor. He held great responsibility and influence at the community level, and thus interacted frequently with American occupation forces. For a complete description and examples of an alcalde's duties see; William C. Carpenter, Travels and Adventures in Mexico: With the Course of Journey of Upwards of 2500 Miles . . . (New York: Harper & Bros., 1851), pp. 259-263.

³³ General Order No. 127, April 29, 1847. Army of Occupation, Orders Headquarters of the Army in Mexico. National Archives: Office of The Adjutant General (Record Group 94)

come, our punishing those who prevent them, will shew [sic] them that we know and feel our strength."³⁴

Discipline played an important role in ensuring security for Mexican civilians. Without a proper disciplinary system and the will to implement it, American troops could have jeopardized Scott's entire conciliation effort through the commission of crimes and atrocities. General Taylor had a more difficult time with guerrillas than Scott because the discipline necessary to implement the practice of fair treatment toward civilians was not always present with his volunteers. By the autumn of 1847, guerrilla activity in the North reached its worst level since the critical time during the spring described in the first chapter.³⁵ Travelers daily found dead civilians along roads leading from American camps to local towns. People on both sides assumed American volunteers were responsible. Mexican retaliations followed, only to be answered in turn by the volunteers who would kill even more civilians the next day. The spiraling cycle of violence did not end until just before American troops pulled out of Northern Mexico when Brigadier General John Wool adopted many of Scott's procedures.³⁶ Scott had problems in controlling his volunteers as well. Lieutenant Semmes related how the name "volunteer" struck terror into the common inhabitant along the road between Veracruz and Mexico City.³⁷

³⁴ Anderson, An Artillery Officer, p. 162.

³⁵ Smith, Chile Con Carne, p. 358.

³⁶ Kenly, Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer, p. 152.

³⁷ Semmes, The Campaign of General Scott, p. 61.

While discipline was a problem for Scott, it was a crisis for Taylor. Each commander committed considerable energy to conciliate the civilian population through a process of fair treatment, but the difference lay in the make-up of their two armies. Taylor's force, composed of ninety percent volunteers, was fiercely independent. Moreover, the volunteer officers were often unwilling to enforce unpopular regulations on men they grew up with and lived among in America. Scott commanded a predominately regular force with regular officers committed to enforcing discipline among the troops. This distinction explains why Scott's army was more successful in limiting guerrilla operations.

A key in achieving discipline and ensuring order in occupied areas was the imposition of a military justice system and the enforcement of legal punishments against guerrillas. The officer corps implemented a relatively impartial justice system in areas of occupation. Military courts worked as a positive factor in limiting the guerrillas' effectiveness because they decreased the level of discontent among the Mexican people by allowing them a peaceful means of adjudicating American indiscretions, as opposed to joining or supporting the guerrillas. Most civilians believed the American invaders generally treated them fairly and when a grievance occurred it could be addressed in a court of law, but captured guerrillas received much less benign treatment. Americans gave civilians in court the benefit of the doubt, while captured guerrillas often faced execution after being tried by a military commission. The justice system contributed to conciliation for two reasons; first civilians were generally protected from atrocities

committed by American soldiers, and second to become a guerrilla and be caught could be tantamount to a death sentence.³⁸

At the beginning of the war a serious problem existed in the area of legal jurisdiction. The American military had no experience in governing occupied territory. Soldiers acted under the articles of war, but these statutes did not possess any contingencies for American occupation of a foreign country. Under the articles, troops who committed crimes were to be tried by civil magistrates with appropriate jurisdiction, but this only applied if the offense occurred in the United States.³⁹ Brutal crimes committed by American soldiers in Mexico went unpunished because the military justice system had no legal means of dealing with infractions that occurred outside the country. In a letter to his brother dated November 14, 1846, Colonel Curtis, an attorney in civilian life, discussed the problem. He felt that the current "miserable code" of military law offered no viable means for enforcing discipline and prosecuting American crimes committed in a foreign country. Curtis placed the blame squarely on General Taylor's shoulders because the northern commander would not take the step of changing the system. He said that if Taylor "had the power of *proclatius dominium* in issuing edicts perhaps under this we might find some portent for punishing thieves and murderers: but General Taylor always takes care to assert no such extraordinary powers. Neither Mexican or American laws will prevail and justice cannot be legally administered."⁴⁰

³⁸ Anderson, *An Artillery Officer*, p. 54.

³⁹ Curtis, *Mexico Under Fire*, p. 20.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

General Scott took it upon himself to develop a viable means of solving this judicial problem. He ordered martial law imposed wherever the Army was in control, placing civilians as well as soldiers under the jurisdiction of military courts. While still in Washington, Scott heard through Taylor's reports "that the wild volunteers as soon as beyond the Rio Grande, committed, with impunity, all sorts of atrocities on the persons and property of Mexicans."⁴¹ He drafted his martial law order that provided the authority for any Americans, military or civilian, and any Mexicans involved in crimes against Americans to be tried by a military court. He gave a copy to Secretary Marcy who refused to comment on it "as too explosive for safe handling."⁴² The Attorney-General then asked for a copy, and likewise returned it with no comment. General Scott concluded that all the "authorities were evidently alarmed at the proposition to establish martial law, even in a foreign country, occupied by American troops. I therefore was left in my own darkness on the subject."⁴³ Knowing that he was being set up as the scapegoat if negative repercussions occurred because of the order, Scott courageously assumed the responsibility for trying to keep order in Mexico. He issued his proposal as General Order 20 on arriving in Tampico, and then republished it at Veracruz, Puebla, and Mexico City.⁴⁴ After the war, Scott concluded that martial law was invaluable because

⁴¹ Scott, Memoirs, p. 392.

⁴² Ibid., p. 393.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ General Order No. 20, February 19, 1847. Army of Occupation, Orders Headquarters of the Army in Mexico. National Archives: Office of The Adjutant General (Record Group 94)

“without it, I could not have maintained the discipline and honor of the army, or have reached the capital of Mexico.”⁴⁵

The officer corps as a whole worked hard to minimize violence between soldiers and civilians. When troops were stationed in cities, officers rigorously enforced a curfew to curtail problems between the two groups. Soldiers patrolled Mexico City during its occupation not only to quiet Mexican unrest but also to keep American troops off the streets after dark.⁴⁶ In December 1847, morning patrols in Mexico City found the body of a volunteer who had broken curfew the previous night. They arrested and charged a young Mexican with the murder, and brought him before a military commission. Due to insufficient evidence, the board of officers acquitted the man over loud objections from the dead soldier's friends.⁴⁷ In another case centered around Mexico City, military authorities charged two American teamsters of murdering a Mexican boy, and sentenced them to death by hanging.⁴⁸ The courts did not always rule in favor of Mexican citizens, but it occurred with enough frequency to appear that the military courts were generally impartial.

While the treatment of civilians in military court was generally lenient, the Army dealt with captured guerrillas in a harsh and uncompromising manner. The Secretary of War informed General Scott that the guerrilla system to which Mexico had resorted “is hardly recognized as a legitimate mode of warfare, and should be met with the utmost

⁴⁵ Scott, Memoirs, p. 395.

⁴⁶ Ballentine, Autobiography of an English Soldier, p. 314.

⁴⁷ Anderson, An Artillery Officer in The Mexican War, p. 218.

⁴⁸ Kenly, Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer, p. 365.

allowable severity.”⁴⁹ The Army therefore treated guerrillas with less restraint because the message it wanted to get across was one of fairness toward civilians and rigidity toward partisans. In December 1947, three months after occupying the capital, Scott issued an order that clearly defined American policy toward captured guerrillas. He declared that “no quarter will be given to known murderers or robbers, whether guerilllas [sic] or rancheros, and whether serving under commissions or not.” He emphasized his willingness to execute offenders, but only after they had been “momentarily held as prisoners, that is, not put to death without due solemnity of a trial by a council of three officers.”⁵⁰

In Puebla on February 4, 1848, a commission tried three guerrillas on the charge of murder. The American officers found the men guilty and sentenced them to hang. Colonel Childs, following the orders he received from General Scott on December 12, 1847, approved the verdict and ordered the partisans to be executed on February 8, 1848. Hearing of the sentence, General Rea sent word to Childs that if his men hanged he would return to Puebla and put the whole American garrison to death. The execution proceeded as scheduled, but Rea never arrived.⁵¹ As a component of Scott’s conciliation process, the justice system worked to keep discipline among his troops, offered civilians a peaceful means of answering American crimes, and meted out stern justice to guerrillas.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 316.

⁵⁰ Scott, Memoirs, p. 575.

⁵¹ Brackett, General Lane’s Brigade, p. 254.

The Church

In the war's early stages, one of the biggest concerns for American leaders was that the Mexican Church would incite the population into resisting the United States by portraying the conflict as a religious war threatening Catholicism. The Church possessed enormous influence and wealth in Mexico, and anti-Catholic sentiment was strong in the United States. This potentially dangerous combination meant that if America appeared to be attacking Mexico's freedom of worship, the Church could cause serious damage to the war effort by encouraging civilians to rise up against the invader. President Polk enlisted the aid of New York Bishop John Hughes to counter "the false idea, industriously circulated by interested partisans in Mexico, that our object was to overthrow their religion and rob their churches, and that if they believed this they would make a desperate resistance to our army in the present war."⁵² The Bishop agreed that these impressions could be dangerous to the American war effort, and arranged for three Spanish-speaking priests from the United States to accompany the Army as chaplains. Their mission was to assure Mexican priests and civilians that "their religion and church property would be secure, and that far from being violated, both would be protected by our army."⁵³ The President's personal commitment on this issue illustrates how potentially dangerous the guerrilla conflict could be if allowed to evolve into a holy war,

⁵² Polk, The Diary of a President, p. 97.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

and the importance of keeping good relations with the Church for the success of America's conciliation plan.

General Scott also foresaw the danger of alienating the Church and worked hard to ensure good relations between the American Army and Mexico's religious establishment.⁵⁴ Scott considered the proclamation he issued at Jalapa on May 11, 1847, which mandated the protection of the Church and its possessions, as his "crowning act of conciliation." The decree assured "the clergy, civil authorities, and inhabitants of all the places we have occupied" that the United States "respects, and will ever respect private property and persons, and the property of the Mexican Church.... Woe to him who does not!" Scott believed the proclamation "produced more decided effects than all the blows from Palo Alto to Cerro Gordo."⁵⁵

Scott urged his officers to show every respect for the Mexican religion, even going so far as to cancel drill on Sundays. Robert Anderson commented on Scott's resolve by saying the General "has ordered a spirit of conciliation to be practiced, and among other things, we should seem to evince respect for the Sabbath."⁵⁶ America's commanding general did not stop at issuing simple declarations. He physically demonstrated his dedication to this facet of the conciliation process. Scott and most of his staff regularly attended Catholic mass together and took part in several processions and religious ceremonies. He even ordered his men to "salute not only the tasseled cane

⁵⁴ Edward D. Mansfield, The Life of General Winfield Scott, Embracing His Campaign in Mexico (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1848), pp. 410-411.

⁵⁵ Scott, Memoirs, p. 549.

⁵⁶ Anderson, An Artillery Officer, p. 211.

of the magistrate but the cassock of the priest.”⁵⁷ Other officers saw the importance of a good relationship with the Church. Colonel Childs, while governing at Jalapa, took part in a procession of the host. Pennsylvania volunteers contended that this display is “a complete compromise of the national honor.”⁵⁸ Despite resentment from some of the men and in some cases personal reservations, Scott’s officers understood the importance of conciliating the Church and worked hard to achieve that end.

⁵⁷ Smith, War with Mexico, vol. II., p. 221; Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War, p. 104.

⁵⁸ Oswandel, Notes of the Mexican War, p. 105.

Conclusion

Guerrilla conflict during the Mexican War had the potential to affect the struggle's outcome, but by developing and implementing a viable operational procedure American officers limited guerrilla effectiveness. Future wars will of course have their own variables but important lessons can be learned from considering this successful counter-guerrilla procedure. The Mexican War, fought in the middle of the last century, is different from modern conflicts in its level of technology, and the battlefield's complexity, but guerrilla struggles continue to be a factor in twentieth century wars such as the Vietnam Conflict. Historians and soldiers can learn valuable lessons from the careful consideration of a successful counter-guerrilla campaign, such as that conducted by American forces in the Mexican War.

American officers in Mexico foresaw the potential threat of a guerrilla conflict, and developed a practical operational procedure to counter the danger. They committed themselves to the effort and enforced the level of discipline required to implement the proposed plan. Scott's army was more successful in the anti-guerrilla campaign because Taylor and his officers were unable and unwilling to discipline effectively their primarily volunteer force. The officer corps maintained flexibility through the combination of aggressive expeditions and a policy of conciliation toward Mexican civilians. Flexibility also played an important part in tactical execution, as commanders, such as Joseph Lane, tailored the composition of their units to the immediate task. The overriding goal of counter-guerrilla operations was to seize the initiative, and, in most cases, it was the Americans who dictated the nature and scope of these engagements.

The American Army's counter-guerrilla effort benefited from a centralized command structure that allowed decentralized execution. Appearing simple on paper, to achieve the correct balance between oversight and allowing commanders to use their own judgment is a difficult task. When operations would swing to one extreme or the other, such as unorganized groups chasing guerrillas without a plan, disaster seemed to follow. The procedure of conciliation and aggressive counter-guerrilla operations gave American units the general parameters for the unconventional war. How the two aspects balanced in any given area seemed best left up to the local commander, but Scott did not hesitate to intervene in situations that seemed to be deviating from his general plan. Scott led the procedure's development, but his officers contributed to and implemented the plan of aggressive counter-guerrilla operations and civilian conciliation, which ultimately limited the potentially devastating guerrilla threat to a level of nuisance and ineffectiveness.

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